

## A Baha'i Perspective on Death

### Life, Death, and the Soul

According to Bahá'í teachings human nature is fundamentally spiritual. Although human beings exist on earth in physical bodies, the essential identity of each person is defined by an invisible, rational, and everlasting soul.

The soul animates the body and distinguishes human beings from the animals. It grows and develops only through the individual's relationship with God, as mediated by His Messengers. The relationship is fostered through prayer, knowledge of the scriptures revealed by these Teachers, love for God, moral self-discipline, and service to humanity. This process is what gives meaning to life.

Cultivation of life's spiritual side has several benefits. First, the individual increasingly develops those innate qualities that lie at the foundation of human happiness and social progress. Such qualities include faith, courage, love, compassion, trustworthiness and humility. As these qualities are increasingly manifest, society as a whole advances.

Another effect of spiritual development is alignment with God's will. This growing closer to God prepares the individual for the afterlife. The soul lives on after the body's death, embarking on a spiritual journey towards God through many "worlds" or planes of existence. Progress on this journey, in traditional terms, is likened to "heaven." If the soul fails to develop, one remains distant from God. This condition of remoteness from God can in some sense be understood as "hell." Thus, heaven and hell are regarded not as literal places but descriptions of one's spiritual progress toward the light of God.

### Heaven and hell: a Bahá'í view of life after death

As in the world's other religions, the Bahá'í concept of life after death is deeply integrated into teachings about the nature of the soul and the purpose of this earthly life.

Bahá'u'lláh confirmed the existence of a separate, rational soul for every human. In this life, He said, the soul is related to the physical body. It provides the underlying animation for the body and is our real self.

Although undetectable by physical instruments, the soul shows itself through the qualities of character that we associate with each person. The soul is the focal point for love and compassion, for faith and courage, and for other such "human" qualities that cannot be explained solely by thinking of a human being as an animal or as a sophisticated organic machine.

The soul does not die; it endures everlastingly. When the human body dies, the soul is freed from ties with the physical body and the surrounding physical world and begins its progress through the spiritual world. Bahá'ís understand the spiritual world to be a timeless and placeless extension of our own universe--and not some physically remote or removed place.

Entry into the next life has the potential to bring great joy. Bahá'u'lláh likened death to the process of birth. He explains: *"The world beyond is as different from this world as this world is different from that of the child while still in the womb of its mother."*

The analogy to the womb in many ways summarizes the Bahá'í view of earthly existence. Just as the womb constitutes an important place for a person's initial physical development, the physical world provides the matrix for the development of the individual soul. Accordingly, Bahá'ís view life as a sort of workshop, where one can develop and perfect those qualities which will be needed in the next life.

*"Know thou, of a truth, that if the soul of man hath walked in the ways of God, it will, assuredly return and be gathered to the glory of the Beloved," Bahá'u'lláh wrote. "By the righteousness of God! It shall attain a station such as no pen can depict, or tongue can describe."*

In the final analysis, heaven can be seen partly as a state of nearness to God; hell is a state of remoteness from God. Each state follows as a natural consequence of individual efforts, or the lack thereof, to develop spiritually. The key to spiritual progress is to follow the path outlined by the Manifestations of God.

Beyond this, the exact nature of the afterlife remains a mystery. *"The nature of the soul after death can never be described," Bahá'u'lláh writes.*

## THE AFTERLIFE

**O SON OF MAN! The light hath shone on thee from the horizon of the sacred Mount and the spirit of enlightenment hath breathed in the Sinai of thy heart. Wherefore, free thyself from the veils of idle fancies and enter into My court, that thou mayest be fit for everlasting life and worthy to meet Me. Thus may death not come upon thee, neither weariness nor trouble.**

"The world beyond is as different from this world as this world is different from that of the child while still in the womb of its mother. When the soul attaineth the Presence of God, it will assume the form that best befitteth its immortality and is worthy of its celestial habitation. Such an existence is a contingent and not an absolute existence, inasmuch as the former is preceded by a cause, whilst the latter is independent thereof. Absolute existence is strictly confined to God, exalted be His glory. Well is it with them that apprehend this truth. Wert thou to ponder in thine heart the behavior of the Prophets of God thou wouldst assuredly and readily testify that there must needs be other worlds besides this world." Baha'u'llah

O SON OF THE SUPREME! I have made death a messenger of joy to thee. Wherefore dost thou grieve? I made the light to shed on thee its splendour. Why dost thou veil thyself therefrom?

Abdu'l-Baha (son of Baha'u'llah) spoke about death in this manner: "...I am consoled by the realization that the worlds of God are infinite; that though they were deprived of this existence, they have other opportunities in the life beyond, even as Christ has said, "In my Father's house are many mansions." They were called away from the temporary and transferred to the eternal; they abandoned this material existence and entered the portals of the spiritual world. Foregoing the pleasures and comforts of the earthly, they now partake of a joy and happiness far more abiding and real, for they have hastened to the Kingdom of God. "

According to the Baha'i Faith, death is not final, but a transition to another realm of existence.