

Life
EVERLASTING

*Heaven, Hell,
Death, and Judgment*

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About *Life Everlasting: Heaven, Hell, Death, and Judgment*

As Catholics, we believe the end of this life isn't the end of the story: It's just the beginning. *Life Everlasting: Heaven, Hell, Death, and Judgment* explores the teachings about what truly awaits us after this life in the world to come. Through the lens of Scripture, the *Catechism*, and the timeless wisdom of the Church, this mini-study will help you uncover how these truths aren't meant to fill us with fear but should give us great hope.

The last things call us to live each day with our eyes fixed on eternity, and they show us how our daily lives have meaning and purpose beyond what we can see in the present moment. Each session is brimming with theological insights that reveal the deeper meaning of our struggles, bring clarity to our decisions, and illuminate the purpose of our journey. Whether you use this for individual study or explore these topics with a group, you will have the opportunity to grow closer to God as you learn about the life to come.

Materials: What do I need for this study?

- **Study Book:** This book contains the core content for all five sessions of this mini-study. Each session offers an overview of each chapter topic and contains questions for individual reflection and group discussion.
- **Video Presentations:** These video presentations by Dr. Edward Sri and Dr. Jeffrey Morrow provide comprehensive teaching and commentary on heaven, hell, death, and judgment. They are available online or for purchase as a DVD set.

In addition to the workbook and video presentations, every participant and facilitator should have a copy of a Catholic Bible and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. We recommend ***The Great Adventure Catholic Bible***, which incorporates the color-coded *Bible Timeline*® Learning System along with informative side features and helpful contextual information throughout. We also recommend the **Ascension Edition** of the *Catechism*, which uses the

color-coded Foundations of Faith approach. Both are available for purchase at AscensionPress.com.

Additionally, complete digital versions of the Bible and *Catechism* are also available for free on the Ascension app.

Structure: What makes this a “mini-study”? What are the main components of each session?

We consider this a mini-study because of its concentrated focus on one topic—namely, the last things—along with its reduced amount of required outside reading. These sessions are short, engaging, and designed to fit easily within your daily routine or small group meeting schedule. The content for each session is self-contained within the chapters of this book; additional references and resources are included, but they are not required for small group discussion. Ultimately, each session is meant to help you focus more on prayerful discernment of the material and less on completing homework answers.

Each session includes the following components:

- **Reading:** Each session features material that can be read on your own time and questions that will help you think more deeply about what you have read. We encourage you to read the material ahead of your small group meeting, but it can be read at any time, before or after your group discussion.
- **Questions for Reflection and Discussion:** The reflection questions in the book feature individual reflection questions and group discussion questions, offering you the opportunity to apply the teachings and wisdom of each session to your personal life as well as process larger insights in a group setting. We recommend reviewing the questions in advance of your meeting to help you prepare for discussion.
- **Small Group Meeting:** Coming together in a small group to discuss the study questions is a time for fellowship and for sharing questions and insights. During your group meeting, we recommend watching the video presentation at the beginning of your group meeting, before the discussion. Video outlines for each session are available for download at AscensionPress.com.

Format: What's the general sequence for small group meetings?

Each small group is different. Therefore, how you choose to conduct these small group gatherings—from the length of each meeting to how you approach the discussion and video presentation—will depend on the needs of your group. For the best experience during your meeting, we recommend completing these steps in the following order:

Watch

The videos provide a rich understanding of *Life Everlasting: Heaven, Hell, Death, and Judgment* with a special emphasis on ways to apply what you have learned to your daily life. Watching the video presentation as a group will provide insight and context for your discussion. Again, video outlines for each session are accessible online and available for download at AscensionPress.com.

Discuss

In this conversation, members of your group will have an opportunity to share insights, reflections, and further questions about the readings and discussion questions. The goal of the discussion is for the group to engage in fellowship and share ideas for applying these teachings on the last things to everyday life. Trained facilitators should guide the small group discussion and keep it on track.

Getting the Most Out of This Study

Although this is a mini-study, you want to be sure that the time and energy you put into it are worth the effort. Here are some ways to make sure your participation in this study will have a fruitful, long-lasting impact.

If You Have Time, Explore Additional Resources

Much of the content in each chapter includes plenty of references to Scripture, the *Catechism*, Church documents, and other resources. Consider returning to these resources for deeper exploration and further insight into the topic at hand.

Take Notes

As you read, make a note of the lines, images, and questions that come to mind. These are not only good things to bring up in small group discussion, but they are also invaluable to bring into a conversation with God in prayer. Also take advantage of the personal reflection questions at the end of each session to help you reflect and apply these insights to your daily life.

Focus on Good Discussion

The success of a small group depends on a good discussion. The people in your group will have unique insights; the questions you ask and connections you make together will deepen your understanding and appreciation of the last things that individual study cannot. Some individuals in your group may be naturally eager to speak up, while others are more inclined to wait and listen. It is in everyone's interest to help make sure each person in the group has a fair chance to share their thoughts. Follow the "Ten Commandments for Small Group Discussion" (p. 86) and be mindful of how you are contributing to the conversation.



The Disputation of the Holy Sacrament by Raphael

Introduction

“The world is thy ship, and not thy home.”

—St. Thérèse of Lisieux

Not for Duplication



Growing up in a culturally Jewish household, I was often struck by the profound religious rituals my family observed, especially those surrounding death and mourning. I experienced these rituals firsthand when my grandfather and grandmother died, both within a few days of each other. My entire family came together to mourn their passing. I was Catholic by this time, though my family, following Jewish tradition, began the mourning process with “sitting shiva,” which is seven days of solemn mourning at home (*shiva* comes from *sheva*, the Hebrew word for “seven”). These first seven days kicked off a year-long process of ritual mourning that culminated in the “unveiling”—something American Jews typically refer to as “stone-setting”—when we returned to the gravesite and unveiled the tombstone. From that point forward, there are annual reminders of the loved ones lost, along with prayers that accompany such remembrances. These solemn yet beautiful rituals help mourners honor the memory of their loved ones.

Although my grandparents’ passing was a sad event, I encountered a deep sense of love within that sadness. The most poignant aspect of this process was, for me, being accompanied by so many family members and friends; we gathered together to be present to one another. This moment was also a chance to focus on what truly matters in life: God, family, friends. Times like these can help us orient our lives toward those things that really matter in the end.

The term “last things” means exactly what it implies: namely, our death, our eternal destiny, and the end of the world as we know it. These universal realities are quite practical for us to understand because, no matter who we are, where we are from, or what we have done, we will all experience the last things at the end of our lives and at the end of time.

Even so, the last things aren’t something many of us are necessarily eager to discuss. Thinking ahead to the moment of our death—and what comes afterward—can make us uncomfortable, sad, or afraid. Much of our unwillingness to think about death stems from our fear of the unknown. The last things bring up many natural questions: *What will happen when I die? Is there a life after death, and if so, what is it going to be like? How will I be judged for*

my choices and actions in this life? Perhaps the most uncomfortable question of all is, *Am I ready for it?*

Thankfully, Catholic teaching on the last things answers these and many other questions that surround these interrelated ideas. Our Christian belief, of course, is that death is but a portal to eternity. Our life story on earth doesn't end with "The End," period; in fact, when we die, our journey is only beginning.

Beyond our personal end, Catholic teaching on the last things also explains the very end of human history and the end of the world. Talking about the end of the world might conjure up mental images of street preachers with signs declaring, *The End Is Near!*—all intended to stir up urgency and dread about our imminent doom. Rather than fill us with fear or dismay, the Church's teachings about the end of time should fill us with hope. For those of us who are in Christ, we are, in the words of St. Paul, a "new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17)—and while the old things will pass away, we live with the promise of all that will be restored at the end of time.

In the technical jargon of theologians, the study of the last things is known as "eschatology." Any study on the last things will include topics like death and judgment, hell, purgatory, heaven, and Christ's Second Coming. We will cover all of these themes throughout the course of this study point by point, exploring the Church's teaching on each and what matters most during our lives, at the moment of our death, and after death in eternity.

Before we examine these topics in earnest, here is an overview of what we will cover throughout the study.

ESCHATOLOGY: a field of theological study concerned with the doctrines surrounding death and resurrection, Christ's Second Coming, the Last Judgment, and the final destiny of humankind.

Death and Judgment

The first topic we'll discuss in this study is, naturally, death—and along with it, we will discuss judgment. Death and judgment go hand in hand because, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) tells us, we will each be immediately rewarded according to our faith and our deeds in life at the moment of our death. (This is considered a “particular” judgment, which differs from person to person and will confirm our eternal destiny; see CCC 1021.) In this regard, death is not the termination of existence, but in many ways it is the ultimate fulfillment of our existence and of our relationship with God. The prospect of our personal judgment at death need not cause us fear; instead, it should spur us on, right now, to get to know God and love him better each day.

This view of death is vastly different from what we may hear in our secular culture. Beyond religion, the topic of death is usually considered to be the moment our bodies stop functioning, and we simply cease to exist. Such a description does little to remove our natural fear of death, and it does nothing to reassure us when we experience the death of a loved one. As we will see in this study, the Church's teaching on death and dying is neither anti-scientific nor anti-rational. Instead, the Catholic Faith provides a much more complete description of death than our secular culture could possibly offer.

The subject of death invariably involves suffering and sadness, and for good reason. From the beginning, God never intended us to die; death was a consequence of Adam and Eve's misused freedom. Our Catholic Faith explains what death truly is. But God has transformed the natural evil of death into our entry into eternity. Death has become a step in our final journey to God.

One of the important topics we'll tackle alongside this topic is the Church's teaching on the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick—what used to be called “Last Rites”—and why it is such an important sacrament of the Catholic Faith. Together, we will discover the biblical roots of this wonderful sacrament, and we will learn why the Anointing of the Sick is a sacrament all of us should desire to receive.

Death, of course, is just the beginning. After death, we will study our ultimate destiny—and the places we can spend our eternity.

Hell

After looking death square in the face, we will next turn our attention to the terrifying prospect that is hell. There's no way to sugarcoat the Church's teaching about hell: It is truly *hellish*. But why hell? What is it? What are demons—the first among hell's residents? And how could a good and loving God condemn sinners to an eternity of suffering in such an awful place?

In many ways, hell is not so much a place where God “sends” people as it is a final destination we choose on our own. Moreover, what many Catholics don't realize is that the Bible translates a number of different Greek words as “hell”—but these words sometimes refer to different aspects of life after death, before and after the coming of Christ. We will take a look at these and other much-misunderstood teachings about hell as we discuss how one achieves hell as their final destination and, more importantly, how we can avoid going there.

Purgatory

After covering hell, we will look at purgatory. Purgatory is perhaps even more misunderstood than either heaven or hell. “Where's purgatory in the Bible?” is perhaps the most common question people will ask about purgatory—and it's a question Catholics may struggle to answer. It is a doctrine unique to the Catholic Church; no other Christian tradition teaches it—but as we will see, purgatory has deep biblical roots. With Scripture as our basis, we will explore how the Church teaches that purgatory is not eternal but rather a temporal state of final purification after death.



Saint Teresa of Avila Interceding for Souls in Purgatory by Peter Paul Rubens

Contrary to popular misconceptions, purgatory is not a place “in between” heaven and hell; neither is purgatory a “second chance” at heaven after death. Understanding what the Church actually teaches about purgatory, in light of its biblical basis, is quite exciting! It’s one of the most moving Catholic teachings concerning the last things. Purgatory embodies the hope of heaven, since heaven is guaranteed for all of the holy souls in purgatory.

Closely connected to purgatory is Catholic teaching on indulgences, which is definitely a point of confusion for Catholics and non-Catholics alike. We will discuss indulgences in the context of overcoming the lingering attachments we have to sin, helping not only ourselves but also the holy souls in purgatory on their final path to heaven.

Praying for holy souls in purgatory and obtaining indulgences for them is a beautiful way of contributing to the final stage of their sanctification—their cleansing before joining the eternal wedding banquet of the Lamb in heaven.

Heaven

Our journey through the last things does not end at purgatory. Heaven is our ultimate goal and the home for which we are all truly intended. We will study what we can know about our ultimate home in eternity from Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. But what does the Bible tell us about heaven, exactly? Most importantly, how do I get to heaven?

As we will discover, heaven is not up in the clouds or someplace we can travel to in outer space. Heaven is, quite simply, our heart’s deepest longing. The hope of heaven is written into the very fabric of existence: God made us to spend eternity with him in heaven. Our souls and bodies long for union with God in heaven. The very point of life is aimed toward this dual purpose: to become saints and to help one another become saints—saints who love, serve, and praise God right now on earth so that we can love and praise him for eternity.

Heaven will also be a great homecoming. In heaven, we will finally feel at home. We will be reunited with friends and loved ones from this life, along with friends we never even knew we had—the host of angels and saints, whom we will finally get to know in a personal way that we were unable to in this life. Finally, we will see the Church in its full splendor and glory.

The Second Coming

To conclude our exploration of the last things, we will discuss the hotly debated topic of Christ's Second Coming. We'll look at what the Church teaches (and what it *doesn't* teach) concerning the Second Coming, along with the rich history presented by the early Church Fathers regarding this future event in light of the Bible. There are many different Christian beliefs about the Second Coming—some of which have been condemned by the Church but have been promulgated through popular works of contemporary literature. We will focus on the reality of this highly anticipated event, grounded in Jesus' own teachings.

An important point we will discuss in addition to the Second Coming is the Last Judgment. Earlier, as we previewed the topic of death, we mentioned the subject of judgment—our individual or “particular” judgment. But we will be judged not just once, at the moment of our death, but again, alongside everyone else. This is the final public judgment when, after all of history is brought to a close, we will learn how God, along with the angels and saints, providentially wove together the entire course of human history, using all the individual threads of our lives to create the most beautiful work of art imaginable. We will see the marvelous and awesome way in which God worked the best out of every tragedy, every mistake, every evil—and how God wrote straight with the crooked lines of our lives. We will finally understand how our lives relate to the countless lives of others, how we are all connected, and how the good that we've done has affected countless souls. That is what we can come to expect at the end of all things: the revelation of all that was, and the “new heaven and new earth” (Revelation 21:1) that will follow.

An Acceptable Time

One thing that will set this study apart from other studies on the last things is that all our discussions on these themes will be grounded in Sacred Scripture, along with the *Catechism*. We will contextualize the Church's teaching on the last things by examining the biblical roots, the very foundation of the Church's teaching, to help us recognize where the teachings come from—and also the great hope they offer.

In many ways, the Church's doctrine on the last things contains some of the most practical and most comforting elements of Christian teaching. These are experiences that touch us all, impacting the lives of literally everyone we meet. It is here, at our final moments, where the Church's teaching comes to meet us intimately at our most vulnerable point. Like a loving mother, the Church extends to us the love and strength we need, fueled by the virtues of faith, hope, and charity, so that we may be prepared for that final encounter with Christ before we meet him face to face in the next life.

Finally, as we progress through the study, we will discover that while they are called the “last” things, that doesn't mean they should come last in our priorities; it's actually the opposite. As St. Paul told the Corinthians, “Behold, *now* is the acceptable time; behold, *now* is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2, emphasis added). How we understand the last things, along with the questions they raise and the truths they reveal, will greatly affect how we choose to live our lives right here, today. In particular, the last things can help us remember how each day is a gift, and that should encourage us to live with purpose and avoid putting off the important things “for later.” The last things will also inform us about how we should spend our time today to prepare for our own deaths, how we should treat our loved ones at the time of their passing, and how we should remember the souls who have already passed.

The better we understand these last things, the better we can prepare ourselves for that ultimate end—and we can live today with greater clarity and purpose.

For Personal Reflection:

- » Why are the last things—death, judgment, hell, purgatory, heaven, and Christ’s Second Coming—important to me personally?

For Small Group Discussion:

- » Which of the last things is most interesting to you, and why?
- » How do death, judgment, hell, purgatory, heaven, and Christ’s Second Coming relate to each other? What is the primary relationship between each of them?

Video Discussion Questions:

- » What are some common questions you have heard from others about the last things? Which of the last things would you like to understand better through the Church’s understanding? Why?
- » What can we learn about Jesus’ preaching on the last things?

For Further Study

The Last Things in Jesus' Preaching

People often don't realize it, but the last things played a major role in Jesus' preaching. Jesus mentions the last things throughout the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. For example, Jesus preaches about hell on numerous occasions; he likewise describes heaven using imagery tailored to communicate to his audience how wonderful heaven will be. Jesus also speaks about the Last Judgment in a number of places, along with his Second Coming and the end of the world, in several long discourses. Jesus doesn't just preach about the last things, either; throughout his public ministry, he shows his concern for those who were either near death or who had already died. For Jesus, the last things were at the front of his mind.

Here is an overview of Jesus' teaching on the last things throughout the Gospels:

Death	• Jesus shows compassion for the poor widow who has just lost her son (Luke 7:11–17); Jesus raises her son back to life. • Jesus weeps at the death of his friend, Lazarus (John 11:35); moved with pity, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead (John 11:38–44).
Judgment	• Jesus teaches that we will be judged as we judged others (see Matthew 7:1–5 and Luke 6:37–42). • Jesus clearly teaches that we will be judged for our sins, like that of anger (Matthew 5:22) and for careless words (Matthew 12:36–37). • In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31), the rich man is judged severely for a sin of omission, for neglecting the needs of Lazarus who sat at his gate. • The parable of the sheep and the goats foreshadows the consequences of how we act toward our neighbor and the “least of these” (Matthew 25:31–46).

Hell	• Jesus warns his listeners about hell, where “the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:43–48). The context here is on the importance of avoiding sin, that serious sin can lead one to an eternity in hell. • Throughout the Gospels, Jesus uses the imagery of fire to describe the torment of hell (Matthew 5:22; 18:9).
Heaven	• Jesus speaks about heaven as a place he himself will prepare for us (John 14:2). • He likens heaven to a home: “In my Father’s house are many rooms” (John 14:2). • Heaven is the very dwelling place of God (Matthew 6:9). • Jesus’ teaching on heaven implies that it is a place where things endure and do not corrupt, unlike our earthly life where everything seems to undergo corruption from moths and rust (Matthew 6:20).
The Second Coming	• Near the end of Jesus’ ministry, he preaches about his Second Coming. • In Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21, Jesus discusses the end of the age and his Second Coming, when “the sign of the Son of man in heaven” will appear, and “they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Matthew 24:30).

Insights from Dante

Perhaps no one imagined the afterlife with as much creative depth and vivid detail as the Italian poet, Dante Alighieri. Dante wrote the *Divine Comedy*, an artistic imagining of humankind’s eternal destinations, developed in three parts: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. In the *Inferno*, Dante and his guide, the Roman poet Virgil, take the reader on a harrowing tour of the depths of hell. In the second part, *Purgatorio*, Dante explores the realm where holy souls are purified, preparing them for eternity in heaven. In his final portion, *Paradiso*, Dante explores the mysteries of heaven.

Dante begins his *Divine Comedy* with a sort of midlife crisis, “midway on our life’s journey,”¹ with his path blocked by three beasts, representing temptations to sin: the leopard (fraud or envy), the lion (violence or pride), and the wolf (lust or greed). Dante’s plummet through the very depths of hell is intended to frighten readers so that they desire to do anything in their power to avoid ending up in hell for eternity. We see in Dante’s hell how the sufferings are punishments that “fit the crime,” so to speak, representing the logical fruition of the unrepented sins that individuals committed during their earthly lives (for example, murderers are boiled in blood).

In *Purgatorio*, we are instructed in the remedy for sin. The souls in purgatory had sinned, but contrary to the specific sins punished in hell, we find the general categories into which all sins may be classified, namely the seven deadly sins: pride, envy, wrath, sloth, greed, gluttony, and lust. As opposed to punishment, since each of these souls had already been forgiven for their sins while still alive on earth, the wounds inflicted by their sins are healed. Thus, rather than the fruition of their sins, we find the *reversal* of their sins (for example, the proud are pushed to the ground, bent over—a sort of passive growth in humility represented physically). Whereas the damned souls in hell are found cursing God and each other, the holy souls in purgatory are praising God, invoking the saints, and helping one another as their shared sufferings passively purify them. Dante’s *Purgatorio* instructs readers on how to avoid hell and prepare for heaven: contrition, living lives of penance, giving to the needy, and filling one’s day with prayer.

Finally, *Paradiso* is intended to make heaven look so attractive that readers will want to strive to get there. The fellowship with the saints and the beatific vision of God are thus depicted so that Dante’s readers will want to take the lessons from the *Purgatorio* and put them into action, here and now in this life, so that they can join the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints praising God in heaven for all eternity.

While it is not so much a theological work as it is a creative work, Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is filled with practical lessons concerning the last things that we can learn from today.