

Heaven



&



Hell

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Introduction

Heaven or hell: You will end up in one or the other. In the words of the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:10, "...we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."

So why is it that you hear so little about either in much of modern Christendom today?

This is a good question. And when we look back over the great times of revival in church history it is one we definitely have to ask, for in those times of great awakening heaven and hell were very much to the forefront!

John Knox was so impressed with Calvin's Geneva, he called it, 'the most perfect school of Christ that was ever on earth since the days of the apostles.' Jonathan Edwards once said, 'Every saint in heaven is as a flower in the garden of God, and every soul there is as a note in some concert of delightful music.'

And then there is the classic sermon preached by Edwards on July 8, 1741 — 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.' That was a prime example of hell-fire and brimstone preaching during the Great Awakening (1731-1755). The Second Great Awakening confirmed this same theme, and subsequent revivals also. Already earlier in 1670 the Puritan preacher Thomas Vincent had written a book titled 'Fire and Brimstone in Hell.'

Certainly considering the Lord's teachings in the gospel there is much prominence given to both of these. And when you compare that over against the other scriptures we are quite right to realise there is a serious imbalance in the teaching of these scriptural truths today.

May these studies help to adjust this imbalance. But most of all may they challenge or comfort us regarding the place to which we are going!

Notes to these Studies

While there are two distinct sections in this material, they are divided up into five studies. It is recommended that a study take up one session. A session here implies a group having about an hour to an hour and half per study. Leave room for any questions that arise in connection with the study but don't become too side-tracked—the study leader is advised to keep discussion related to the subject at hand.

Please look up the Bible references, even if you are not specifically asked to do so. If there are a number of them, or it is a larger passage, divide it up amongst the members of the group. It all helps to build up the big picture – and which picture can be bigger than God's picture?

Study 1 — Looking At Heaven

1. What are some of the commonly shared views about heaven in our community?

2. What do you think heaven will be like?

Gary Larson is well known for his cartoons, especially the 'Far Side' series. He can sometimes be very quite sharp and accurate about different situations in our world. But when it comes to what's out of this world he gets it quite wrong. He demonstrated this in a cartoon he drew about heaven. For in it he drew a man with angel wings and a halo sitting on a cloud, doing nothing. The caption reads, "Wish I'd brought a magazine."

It shows that many know so little about heaven. And that's also the case in churches. In fact, heaven has largely fallen off our radar screen.

The same is the case regarding another subject which in the past was often preached and taught about. That also begins with an "H".

Yes, that is “hell”. The next most unmentionable word in Christianity today after “sin”.

It makes sense, doesn't it? While heaven and hell are poles apart, to talk about one means you automatically involve the other. In the same way, because hell is treated as a taboo word in many churches, they also ignore the subject of heaven.

You might disagree here, however. Because there are books about heaven in the Christian book store. They're not actually about heaven, though – they're about people who claim to have been there. And what they say about heaven is quite different than what the Bible tells us about it.

I mean, who wouldn't want you to hear about heaven? Ah, the devil! And that's exactly what Revelation 13 verse 6 says. It states that the beast opened his mouth against God, “to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven.”

So, how does he do this? Well, he's not going to attack it outright. He's too sneaky for that. But he will make it seem a little irrelevant for us today. I'm sure you heard the expression, “He's too heavenly-minded to be of any earthly use!”

And it has worked. Christians have become very earthly minded. We see that with the health-and-wealth heresy being so popular. Their preachers change the meaning of “faith” right around so that it's not the channel the Holy Spirit gives us to God, but merely a means to improve our own prosperity and obtain whatever else we may want on this earth.

But perhaps we know about that heresy. We're not having any part of that!

The devil can be even more subtle, though. Compare the change to a particular hymn. In the old versions (Psalter Hymnal 394:1) it goes, “Spirit of God, dwell Thou within my heart; wean it from earth, through all its pulses move...”. Now listen to it in the new version (Psalter Hymnal 419:1), “Spirit of God, who dwells within my heart, wean it from sin, through all its pulses move...”.

What was the change? Now, that doesn't seem so bad, does it? It's still talking about sin, and all that. It takes a responsible attitude as faithful stewards in this world. It's avoiding escapism. But could it be we've gone too far in the other direction? Have we become uncomfortable talking about our hope in heaven? Are we avoiding

seeing ourselves as pilgrims and strangers whose true home is elsewhere (Hebrews 11:1—16)?

To help us in this, let's have a look now at how our society sees heaven. And we do that by looking at various beliefs people may have about what comes after this life.

Three non-biblical views about the after-life

There are three common views in this world about the after-life, apart from what the Bible says:

i. Annihilationism

This is where death is the end of everything. In the words of a song, this says that we are just “candles in the wind”.

Now, we might think that because of modern science this is a recent view. But it's actually quite old! There was even a major religious group in the New Testament that held to this view.

3. Read Matthew 22:23—33. Who were those holding to this view and how does Jesus expose them here?

Those the Lord is addressing in Matthew 22:23—33 were the Sadducees. Remember, they didn't believe in a resurrection. They were the liberals of their time.

These days that view of death is held by those who believe in evolution. They like to think they're scientific. But are they?

Well, it can quite likely be considered as arrogant. Because who is to say that this world is the best there is? If you are truly evolutionary, wouldn't you think there could be a better world some place else in the universe? Just because people don't think there could be anything apart from this life, that doesn't mean it couldn't be. And hasn't human history proved that man's knowledge and

skills at certain times and places is quite out of kilter with any evolutionary process? You only need to consider the knowledge and skills of the Egyptians and Romans in pyramid and road construction respectively.

4. Is our society at this present age and place really the best we have had so far?

ii. Sentimental Optimism

This is a superstitious belief in life beyond the grave. It's often shown in the types of poems you read in death notices. Here is one example:

*We miss you more and more each day,
And wish that you were here.
But one day we shall meet again
And wipe away each tear.*

This is the view that has a grandfather 'God'. You know, St Peter at the Pearly Gates. I mean, he's going to let you in anyway, isn't he? When God weighs up what you've done, under this view, you're basically all right. You've done more good than bad. There are only a few who are really that bad they won't get in – like Adolf Hitler or Josef Stalin.

This view is not so much anti-Christian as it is sub-Christian.

5. Can any in the group give examples of this 'Sentimental Optimism' they have encountered recently?

iii. Reincarnationism

This is the view of the eastern religions. It's also the view that came out of the 1960's and 1970's search for inner meaning – the New Age Movement.

It's known as *karma*, or the combined results of our actions over this lifetime. Believers in *karma* hold that if our present life is good, we will be reincarnated to a higher position or caste during our next earthly lifetime. On the other hand, if we are bad we could be demoted to cattle or even worms!

There is a country which has this religious view represented in its flag. That country is India. Its national flag features the Hindu wheel that keeps circling round and round, telling us that we will, like that wheel, be constantly reincarnated for our next lifetime on earth.

6. How would you answer someone who said of another's misfortune that it was a result of the karma they themselves made?

The Christian view of the afterlife

The Bible says that every one dies only once (Hebrews 9:27). Once that death occurs, the soul of that person goes either to heaven or to hell (Luke 16:22—23). Heaven is the place of God's abode, while hell is the place where his loving care is not – the place Christ experienced for us on the cross the time he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Jesus went through this for those who believe in his Name – whether they lived before he came, when he was here, or af-

ter he had gone. So it is only by faith that one gets into heaven. It is by acknowledging from your heart that it is only the doing and dying of Christ that saves you are you able to go to heaven.

There is a story that shows this: One day a man dies and goes to the Pearly Gates. He is met by the Lord Jesus who says to him he must have one hundred points to get into heaven. These points are given for the good he has done.

Well, this man thinks this sounds pretty good. It should be no problem.

So he says to the Lord, "I have lived faithfully all my married life with my wife and brought up my children in respect and love."

The Lord says, "That's worth 3 points."

Not much for so much of his life. So he tries again, "I have been twice to church all of my life, apart from when I've been really sick."

"Two points," the Lord says.

Once more he tries, "I have read my Bible every day, given more than a tenth of what I earn to the church and other charities, and spent a lot of time helping out in the community."

"One point," the Lord says.

Well, now that man is really exasperated. He cries out, "Only the grace of God will get me there!"

"One hundred points!" the Lord says.

You see, it's only once you confess that you cannot do anything at all to get into heaven, because it is through God's riches at Christ's expense, that you have the true faith to enter in.

Study 2 — Learning About Heaven

In Scripture we can clearly distinguish between two types of heaven,

These are the scriptural types of heaven:

i. The Physical Heavens

1. Read the following passages:

Psalm 19:4-6

Jeremiah 8:2

Matthew 24:29

Which type of heavens do you think these passage are referring to?

These references are referring to the skies and the universe physically present above the earth. This is the part of our world of which the sun and the moon and the stars are part.

ii. The Place where God is

2. Read the following passages:

Acts 1:6-11

Ephesians 4:7-13

What kind of heavens are being spoken of here and how does it differ from the physical heavens?

This is where our Lord Jesus Christ ascended to. Right now, he is up there in his physical body, ruling at God's right hand. So it is an actual place.

This is the place where God is – his abode.

3. Paul uses an expression in 2 Corinthians 12:2 — 'the third heaven.' It does not appear anywhere else in Scripture.

What do you think Paul is actually describing there?

How did you go? Some Christians have interpreted this as indicating that there are three different levels of heaven, a level for “super-committed Christians” or Christians who have obtained a high level of spirituality, a level for “ordinary” Christians, and a level for Christians who did not serve God faithfully. This view has no basis in Scripture. What Paul is using here is a colloquial Jewish expression for the immediate presence of God. For the apostle this conveys the idea of the sublime blessedness.

How does this tie in with one or other of the two ‘heavens’ Scripture describes?

Getting to know about heaven

i. The hieroglyphics of heaven

In Scripture you find way-out descriptions of heaven, such as pearly gates, rainbow thrones, and streets of gold. It is put this way as the writers of these Bible books were describing it in the only language they knew. What these writers were actually doing was to use symbols to describe what heaven will be like. As the ancient Egyptians used hieroglyphics as a picture alphabet so these symbols are in scripture. Symbols that were universally recognised and understood at that time, as they are nowadays also.

These symbols are signs. And what does a sign do? Ah, it represents something or points to it somehow!

We need understanding, though, to interpret these signs. We only need to think here of the disciples being three years with Jesus. Yet right up to his resurrection they didn’t understand who he was nor what his real purpose in coming to earth was.

But then the Spirit opened their minds and they could see.

This is what faith does. In the words of Hebrews 11 verse 1, “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”

So faith gives you the ability to be able to understand the symbols. Mind you, many Christians still misunderstand them! That’s why we very much need the constant preaching and teaching of God’s Word, so that we learn the right things about heaven and are not lead astray.

4. Can you think of any examples where Christians have misunderstood the symbolism in the biblical language describing heaven?

ii. The relationships in heaven

Do you remember the cartoon by Gary Larson described at the beginning of our studies? He made it seem as though heaven was a boring place. You know, the place where all you do is sing all day! And we think, well, if there’s no food, no marriage, no moon, no sun, no need for good books, and definitely no need for Play-station or the internet, what am I going to do?

The difficulty is that we are trying to see heaven in earthly terms. That was essentially why the Sadducees tried to confront Jesus on the issue of people who had more than one marriage partner while on earth. They said that if you’re going to be reunited in heaven with all those you know on earth you’re going to have some problems. And we can extend that thought further, also. What about those particular people we have had

problems with?

But Jesus turned the tables on the Sadducees, confounding them by saying, “You’re making a mistake. You’re taking earthly relationships and transferring them to heaven as if the same relationships are going to hold true there.” (Mark 12:24-27.)

What we need to see from Scripture is that the bond in Christ transcends the bond of blood. Jesus himself shows that. Luke 2 tells us that when his worried mother finally found him in the temple, he said to her, “Why were you searching for me? Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?”

Jesus valued his biological family, but already by the age of twelve he was saying that the bond of blood will be subservient to the bond of faith.

We see that clearly in his ministry. At the end of Mark 3, someone passes a message to him through a crowded house: “Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.” Why are they looking for him? According to Mark 3:21, they think he’s been working too hard and not looking after himself. They say, “He’s nuts. He has to rest. He can’t go working for God like this.”

So, how does Jesus respond? Does he take some time out from his teaching then? Does he ask those around him to come back tomorrow? No, he asks, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” After looking at those seated around him, he answers, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.”

You see, heaven is where family bonds are surpassed. It’s something so much better. That’s why those who faith is vibrant are a lot closer to Christ. And that’s what we hear throughout the New Testament. The church is called the family of God. We are one in Christ Jesus. Pagans noticed that the early Christians, though they had never seen each other, treated one another as blood brothers.

This also answers our questions about whether we’ll know our loved ones in heaven. Because it seems nice to say that we will. But that would be going against what we have heard Jesus say to the Sadducees about the different relationship we will have in heaven.

We have to look beyond our physical, earthly relationships. It's the spiritual that will count.

5. Why won't we have problems meeting those in heaven with whom we had issues with while on earth? What does this mean for those situations we haven't been able to sort out here below?

Study 3 — Living In Heaven

i. Our bodies in heaven

1. What do you think we will look like in the next world?

In heaven we will have new bodies. They will completely differ-ent to the ones we've got now. And yet they'll still be the same.

You see, they'll be the bodies we would have had if sin had not entered in.

Joni Eareckson Tada says, *Somewhere in my broken, paralysed body is the seed of what I shall become. The paralysis makes what I am to become all the more grand when you contrast atrophied, useless legs against splendorous resurrected legs. I'm convinced that if there are mirrors in heaven (and why not?), the image I'll see will be unmistakably "Joni", although a much better, brighter "Joni." So much so, that it's not worth comparing. There's no way I can comprehend it because I'm just an "acorn" when it comes to understanding heaven. But I'll tell you this: Whatever my little acorn shape becomes, in all its power and honour, I'm ready for it.*

2. Read 1st Corinthians 15:35—49. Which picture does it use to describe how we are being readied for heaven?

This is the truth 1st Corinthians 15 declares. There, in the verses 35 till 49, in particular, it tells us that we are now seeds that need to be planted.

A comparison that might be helpful here is that our knowledge of heaven is a little like the Old Testament saints had of the coming Messiah. They knew He was coming, they knew it would be the Kingdom far above all kingdoms, and yet they could only see dimly. Many of them – even the disciples for three years – got it quite wrong as to what it would be like!

You see, heaven is out of this world! And that's exactly it! It will be so far beyond anything like we've experienced before.

Someone once pictured it like this: *When you grow older you change. What you like and dislike becomes different. You don't go racing around in Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle costumes anymore. The Barbie dolls get put away. You don't even mind mushrooms any more. You like curry.*

Well, in the same way, heaven will be us completely grown up.

Joni goes on: *I'm ready to have this lowly body transformed. That means I won't merely be revived from the dead, like Lazarus when he came out of the tomb. People who return from the dead – whether from the tomb or off the operating table- aren't, like Christ, able then to appear and disappear, walk through walls, or transport themselves through time and space with a single thought.*

No, I will bear the likeness of Jesus, the man from heaven. Like His, mine will be an actual, literal body perfectly suited for earth and heaven.

This new body will come with a perfect heart and a perfect mind. This is the heart Romans 7, the verses 21 till 25 tell us of. And this is the mind 1st Corinthians 13 verse 12 teaches us of.

3. How do you think you will be different with a perfect heart and a perfect mind?

ii. Our work in heaven

4. What do you think you will be doing in heaven?

We come now to what it is we'll do in heaven. This is not an appealing thing for many people – even Christians. Remember how we began our studies with those popular images about what heaven will be like – sitting on a cloud and strumming a harp, flitting about with angel wings, or singing in the choir all day.

Revelation 22:1-5 described what believers are going to do there in heaven. Verse 1 actually continues the whole of chapter 21. Because here the description of the new Jerusalem is continued. For having described in verses 1 and 2 of Revelation 21 the coming of Paradise, and having heard God's declaration

that he is now with his people in the perfect way in verse 3 till 5 and that this is their inheritance, and then having described the glory of heaven through what it's made of and how big it is, John describes how God the Father and the Son forever light up this place for God's elect.

Then we come to Revelation 22 verse 1 where we see why this place will never lack. There will always be a harvest here, because there is no curse there. There's only blessing.

a) Serving for God

5. Read Revelation 22:1-6:

When did you spot the first thing we will be doing in heaven?

It is in verse 3 of Revelation 22 that we first read of what we will be doing in heaven where it tells us that "his (God's) servants will serve him."

Now, to serve faithfully is to do our Master's bidding.

This serving in heaven is also described elsewhere. In Revelation 2:26 it says that "to him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations." (See also Rev. 5:10 and 20:6.) Thus, this serving is related to what we're doing now. Because it's the way we serve now which will determine where we serve in heaven.

Our assignments and duties will be rewards based on our faithfulness to God. This is what the apostle Paul says in 1st Corinthians 3 verses 11 till 15 (read it out). It's also what Jesus

was referring to in Matthew 6:20 when he told us that we should not store up things on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but rather we should be storing up in heaven, where it lasts forever.

David Roper wrote that our serving could well mean we'll explore an unknown corner of the universe. C.S. Lewis suggests you might be governing a distant star.

Another person described it this way:

Heaven is pictured in the bible as a garden, a city, and a home. All three require skill, work and maintenance. Is that why we're told we'll serve God in Heaven? Service is active, not passive. It seems like Heaven will involve lasting accomplishment, unhindered by decay and fatigue, and enhanced by unlimited resources. The Bible says we'll reign with Christ, exercising leadership, making important decisions (see Luke 19:17-19) That means we'll set goals, devise plans and share ideas.

Actually, our best workdays on earth are just a foretaste of the joy our work will bring us in Heaven. Indeed our service to Christ now will determine our position then. Jobs that depend on aspects of our fallen world probably won't exist--such as dentists (decay), police officers (crime), funeral directors (death), and many others.

But that doesn't mean we'll be unemployed. What is an interest or hobby now may become our main vocation then. Others, however, may continue with work similar to what they do now, whether it's gardeners, engineers, builders, artist, animal trainers, teachers, scientists, crafts people, or hundreds of other vocations. The difference is, we'll work without the hindrances of toil, pain, corruption and sin (Rev. 21:4-5)

Whatever that serving will be, we won't at all feel inadequate; we won't lack the energy, and we'll have all the strength we'll need.

Isn't that a change from what many of you are experiencing now? In heaven we will have minds and bodies that can do what we will be assigned to do.

b) Knowing about God

6. Let's now go further through Revelation 22. What is the next reference to what believers will do?

Ah, that's verse 4. It talks about us seeing God's face and his name being on our foreheads. This is telling us that we are with God and in God in the most special way.

In 1st Corinthians 13 verse 12 the apostle said that now we see but a poor reflection; then we shall see him face to face.

This is where everything will make sense! We will know God fully and worship him in the most complete way.

The name of God represents his perfect character. So to bear his name means to be like him. In heaven we will never again struggle with sin but will reflect the beauty of his holiness forever.

Author Victor Hugo spoke of anticipating his work in heaven: *I haven't given utterance to the thousandth part of what lies within me. When I go to the grave I can say, "My day's work is done",... But I cannot say, "my life is done." My work will recommence the next morning. The tomb is not a blind alley; it is a thoroughfare. It closes upon the twilight, but it opens upon dawn.*

c) Reigning with God

7. What is the third thing Revelation 22:1—5 declare that we will do in heaven?

We are told of this right at the end of the passage, because verse 5 ends saying that believers “will reign for ever and ever.”

We are already doing that, because it is through the Church that the Great Commission is being fulfilled. But in heaven our reign will be made in the most perfect way, because everything we think and say and do will be to the glory and honour of His Name.

*C. S. Lewis wrote, *The Christians who did the most for this world were those who thought most of the next. The apostles, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English evangelicals who abolished slave trade, all left their mark on earth — precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of any other world that they have become so ineffective in this one. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in,' aim at earth and you will get neither.**

Looking forward to heaven

We can draw great comfort from knowing something of what we'll do in heaven, because those who love and serve God on earth will feel right at home in heaven.

The English Puritan pastor, Richard Baxter, wrote: *Why aren't our hearts continually set on heaven? Why don't we live there in*

constant contemplation? ... Bend your soul to study eternity, busy yourself to such reflections, and don't let those thoughts be occasional and light, but immerse yourself in heaven's delights.

So, rather than spending your time thinking about where you are now, you as a believer in Jesus Christ also need to meditate upon where you're going to be.

8. Read the following passages:

John 14:1—4

Psalm 16:11

What do these passages tell us in particular about heaven for God's children?

You will go to a place especially prepared for you (John 14:2). You will be with God, where you will enjoy "eternal pleasures" (Psalm 16:11).

Baxter goes on to point out four benefits that come with reflecting upon heaven. These are:

- it protects us from temptation because it keeps the heart focussed on what pleases God;
- it keeps up the energy of the Christian life;
- it gives medicine for our hardships, cheering our spirits and easing our suffering;
- it makes us an encouragement to our fellow pilgrims.

Charles Spurgeon tells the story of an old Scotsman who was asked whether he expected to get to heaven. “Why, man, I live there!” was his reply.

When you live in those spiritual things which are the essential features of heaven, you often go there before you get to stay there. This is shown in what was said of an old Puritan: ‘Heaven was in him before he was in heaven.’

And that is how it should be for each one of us! We must have heaven in us before we get to heaven. In fact, if we don’t get to heaven before we die, we won’t get to go there afterwards!

9. Read Hebrews 11:1-16. How does this show us the way we ought to regard heaven? Discuss the ways we are already living out our heavenly lives right now.

10. How has this study of heaven helped you prepare for it better?

11. Read Revelation 21:1—7.

How much more does this passage mean to you after this study?

Study 4 — The Facts Regarding Hell

We have considered in our study on 'heaven' the different views about the afterlife. There we noted that the biblical view clearly tells us about a heaven and a hell. As it said there, on page 13, "The Bible says that every one dies only once (Hebrews 9:27). Once that death occurs the soul of that person goes either to heaven or to hell. Heaven is the place of God's abode, while hell is the place where his loving care is not – the place Christ experienced for us on the cross in the time when He cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Jesus went through this for the sake of those who believe in his Name – whether they lived before he came, when he was here, or after he had gone. So faith in Christ, through the saving ability of his death and resurrection, is our only hope to get into heaven, where we will be alive with him forever. It is by acknowledging from your heart that it is only the doing and dying of Christ that saves you are you able to go to heaven.

1. Which views are there in the world about hell?

2. What do you think hell is?

We need to understand, as we did in our study on 'Heaven' the figurative nature of much of what is written about this subject. But once we realise this, we are able to translate it in our minds into a form we can understand.

3. Read Luke 16:19-31. How is this figurative? In other words, why is this not literally true? Which truths does it teach us in regards to hell?

Hell is a place

It is sometimes said that Jesus spoke more about hell than about any other subject during his ministry. I'm not too sure about that (he speaks a lot about heaven too!), though there is no doubt he explained quite clearly and definitively what it was, and where it was, and for whom it was.

4. Can you think of any times Jesus mentioned hell or when it is otherwise spoken of in Scripture?

In a Concordance we find the actual word “hell” used by the Lord 14 times in the Gospels. These cover six different teaching occasions in Matthew (Matthew 5:22,29; 10:28; 11:23; 16:18; 18:9; 23:15,33), some of which are paralleled in Mark (Mark 9:43,45,47) and Luke (Luke 10:15; 12:5; 16:23), with Luke adding the distinct parable about ‘The Rich Man and Lazarus’ in Luke 16:19-31.

We can trace the times ‘hell’ is referred to in Scripture through specific words.

These words are:

i) Sheol - a Hebrew term simply describing “the grave” or “death” – does not refer to “hell” specifically

Read the following passages:

Genesis 42:38

Psalm 141:7

Isaiah 14:11

ii) Hades - A Greek term that usually refers to hell – a place of torment

Read the following passages:

Matthew 16:18

Luke 10:15

Luke 16:23

iii) Gehenna - A Greek term (borrowed from a literal continuously burning dump near Jerusalem) that always refers to hell – a place of torment

Read the following passages:

Matthew 5:30

Matthew 23:33

iv) “Furnace of Fire” or “Lake of fire”- the final abode of unbelievers after they are resurrected

Read the following passages:

Matthew 13:42

Revelation 20:14—15

Hell is the place where God is not

The essence of hell is separation from God. God in effect says: "So, you want to live *apart* from me? Do you think that is a preferable state of affairs to living *with* me? Very well, then, go ahead; see how you like it." This may sound a bit rough, but this is essentially the case. The Bible talks several times about God giving men up to their own devices and the hardening of

their hearts. Pharaoh is one example of this.

Read the following passages:

Exodus 7:13

Exodus 7:22

Exodus 8:15

Exodus 8:19

Exodus 8:32

Exodus 9:7

Exodus 9:12

Exodus 9:35

Exodus 10:20

Exodus 10:27

It was this teaching from Scripture that C.S. Lewis summed up when he said that "the doors of hell are locked from the inside."

5. How would you answer someone who said that it is impossible for someone to be sent *away* from the presence of the Lord?

Those asking this question would refer to God's omniscience. They would use such a passage as Psalm 139:7-12 to prove that God being God is everywhere.

They are assuming, though, that God's presence involves His love. But hell is hell because God is indeed there – in His wrath (Hebrews 12:29; Revelation 6:16). In comparison, heaven is heaven because God is there – in all His love. It is from this presence of love that the wicked are banished forever. We only need to think of what the Lord Jesus went through on the cross when he suffered the anguish of hell. It was then he cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt.26:46.)

This is why the descriptions about hell are not nice. The rest of their eternal existence will be racked by the sin which they so much delight in now.

6. Read the following passages:

Matthew 11:20-24

Luke 12:47-48

What does this tell us about hell which we have already seen will be the situation in heaven?

In these passages Jesus makes it clear there are different levels in hell according to the amount of evil one has done while living upon this earth. Revelation 20:12 speaks of people being judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books and, in the light of the verses 13—15 which follow, this could well be to determine how severe the punishment in hell will be.

Study 5 — The Function Of Hell

1. How would you respond to those who say that a loving God wouldn't send people to a horrible hell?

God has provided the way of salvation to all (John 3:16,17; 2 Corinthians 5:14,15; 1 Timothy 2:6; 4:10; Titus 2:11; 2 Peter 3:9). Those who haven't heard of Christ are still accountable because God reveals himself to everybody the world over through the wonders of nature (Romans 1:20). God will seek those who seek Him (Matthew 7:7; Luke 19:10).

Therefore God doesn't send people to hell, they choose to go there (Romans 1:18,21,25). So God is a just God, which also means his love must be balanced over against his justice.

There is an old fable about a crane and a swan. The crane was wading in a stream and looking for snails to eat. Suddenly a beautiful swan landed nearby.

The crane had never seen a swan before. So he asked, "What are you?" "I'm a swan," came the reply.

"And where do you come from?" the crane inquired. "Heaven," the swan answered. And then he eagerly spoke of a city of pure gold with jasper walls and pearly gates.

At that point the crane interrupted. "Tell me," he said, "are there snails in heaven?" "No, I'm afraid not," the swan answered. "Then I don't care to go there," the crane stated decisively. "I like snails!"

Doesn't this remind us of the meeting of Paul with King Agrippa and the Roman Governor Festus in Acts 26? There those two human rulers acknowledged that what the apostle spoke of made a lot of sense. But it did not become for them sanctified sense. Thus Festus reacts in verse 24 by shouting, "You are out of your mind, Paul! Your great learning is driving you insane." And King Agrippa also misses just narrowly being converted when he says in verse 28, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"

They heard the Gospel message but as they were not born again they stand all the guiltier before God. Like the rich man of Luke 16 they had heard the Word of the Lord but rejected it. They preferred the snails!

2. If someone were to say that hell is too severe for man's sin, how would you reply?

In answer to this we have to declare that God is holy-perfect (1 Peter 1:14,15).

We also have to acknowledge that sin is wilful opposition to God our creator (Romans 1:18-32). Our sin does merit hell (Romans 1:32; 2:2,5,6).

What is unfair and amazing is that Christ died for our sin and freely offers salvation to all (Romans 2:4; 3:22-24; 4:7,8; 5:8,9).

Unbelievers live without God for the whole of their lives, and hell is just the natural extension of that lifestyle.

Hell is good for us

3. Can you think of any ways the teaching about 'hell' can be a good thing for us and for others?

This might seem a strange thing to say. You would not think that hell would be a good place for anyone!

Well, let's see this in study why hell is good for us. And not only us as Christians but good for everyone in our society.

We have noticed that people no longer view hell from the biblical perspective. Hell is very rarely preached about in churches today.

And when it is talked about today in many churches perhaps it is described as quite a different place than how it used to be talked about. The Church of England's Doctrine Commission said that hell is "a state of nothingness." This is essentially the teaching of annihilationism which says that the unbeliever doesn't go to a physical place called hell but rather he simply ceases to exist. No pain, no gain, no anything!

This naturally ties in with what a lot of churches are preaching about today. You know the hippy anthem, "love, love, love." Don't go on about the Old Testament Patriarch who had some strong things to say about crime and punishment. Instead, Christianity is presented as a lifestyle which is 'better than' other lifestyles. Thus you get the 'health and wealth' gospel.

And as for those old 'fire and brimstone' sermons — you can be glad they're gone, they say. You never really helped any-

one by putting him in a state of fear like that! You should be positive. Tell people how the good they already are can get better. You have to be positive – not negative.

Do you really? From the 1860's until the 1960's the crime figures fell progressively in the United Kingdom. This was true of New Zealand and Australia as well. And you know this was exactly the time when the Victorian hell-fire preachers who specialised in the brimstone sermon had such a powerful sway.

4. What do you think is meant by the quote: "The road to hell is paved with good intentions?"

I remember how the Youth Club at a previous congregation I served was organising the state-wide Easter Camp. The theme was 'The Last Times.' So it had studies on eschatology – on what the Bible says about the end of this time as we know it. For the final speaker I obtained the services of a minister of the Free Presbyterian Church of Northern Ireland. You might know that denomination as the late Rev. Ian Paisley's denomination.

Well, this minister preached a real 'hell and brimstone' sermon. Those young people were terrified! But, I tell you what, they were really challenged deep inside. While it may seem a cruel thing to say "if you're wicked you'll go to hell," it does give the strong message that if you do wicked things you will

face consequences. And even if you think you've got away with it, there is that all-seeing eye which records your every act. The teaching about hell means we're accountable.

For example, a British Prime Minister of the late 19th century, William Gladstone, believed that as a politician he would be judged by a Higher Court at the end of his life. It was this sense of righteous fear which made him so completely a man of conscience and integrity. Oh, that such a fear would infect our leaders today! The majority of politicians will do whatever will get them the votes. They have no idea at all of there being a greater Judge. In fact, they openly deride any biblical teaching and try to do whatever they can to wipe it off the map altogether.

5. How do people refer to hell these days?

The most common ascription to hell nowadays is as people relate it to their personal experience. 'It was hell people will say of a difficult time they went through. Well, it wasn't hell — actually it was far from what hell is like. So what they have done is to transform hell into a human experience of which they have some concept of. Mental suffering can be 'hell' for those afflicted, what people have endured in concentration camps or any other form of torture, or even necessary operations performed in hospitals and the time spent in hospital. That was hell!

No, it wasn't hell. It was a terrible time. It may well have

displayed man's inhumanity to man and through that gives us a taste of the utter selfishness that will be in hell; but more than anything it shows what happens when there isn't preaching about the biblical hell!

6. Read Matthew 25:31-46. How does what you have been reminded of here or learned for the first time help you understand this passage?

Helpful books:

“Systematic Theology,” By Louis Berkhof

“The Bible on the Life Hereafter,” by William Hendricksen

“Heaven: Your Real Home,” by Joni Eareckson Tada

“Setting Our Sights On Heaven,” by Paul D. Wolfe

“Hereafter,” by David Winter

Cover Art: ‘Parable Of The Rich Man & Lazarus,’ by Heinrich Aldegrever, Engraving, 1554

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