

Heaven and Hell?

After hearing briefly what the Bible says about the problem of evil in the world, it seems appropriate to move on to surveying heaven and hell, since heaven is the realm free from evil and hell is the realm designated for evil's destruction. These places are easily taken for granted, so please, pay close attention to what the Bible has to say about these eternal destinies of souls. The time is approaching fast when you will be found in one or the other.

What comes to your mind when you imagine heaven and hell? Unfortunately, both heaven and hell have been partially misrepresented in popular culture, which has shaped our impression of them. Whether movies, books, music, cartoons, home décor, or billboards, you can find depictions of either heaven or hell. As for heaven, it is usually depicted as this bright place with magnificent clouds where there is only harmony, wholeness, and reunion. Sometimes, when people think about heaven, they get a little nervous about it lasting forever because they wonder how they will not end up getting bored being in such a place endlessly. As for hell, it is usually depicted as a dark dungeon engulfed in ravenous flames with Satan maniacally laughing as people moan. Sometimes, people disregard hell, joking that the rest of their buddies will be there to continue the sinful party.

In our common representations of heaven and hell, there are elements that are very true. However, some of these understandings of eternity can be very misleading because they incline us to treat both heaven and hell as silly, uninteresting, unimportant, or fictional. Although some wish to be superstitious or dismissive about life after death, the Bible gives clear instruction about what really happens to us after we die. So, let us begin to see what God has told us about heaven and hell.

2 Corinthians 5:6-10 says, **"...We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight...We would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord...For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil."** Here, we see Paul teach us that once a Christian dies, he or she immediately goes to be with the Lord in his presence. The converse is true for those who do not believe: they will immediately be sent to the place of the dead where there is torment. We learn more of this from passages such as Philippians 1:21-24, Luke 23:43, and Luke 16:19-31. Once we die, we are immediately placed in a realm that shows our eternal destiny, which cannot be changed. Our eternal destiny cannot change after we die, it can only be changed while on earth. Yet, these

places after we die are not permanent, but are waiting to be completed when Christ returns to judge the living and the dead. Although believers go to heaven after they die, they are still awaiting the resurrection and the new heavens and new earth. Likewise, unbelievers in hell will later be placed into the lake of fire, the second death, after Jesus comes back again for full and final punishment.

Read what Paul says will happen when Jesus returns: **“For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord”** (1 Thessalonians 4:14-17). Here, the Holy Spirit tells us that Jesus will return, and when he does, those who have died in Christ will be raised from the dead first. Then, those who are alive in Christ will then join them to be together with the Lord forever. The Bible also states that who died that were unbelievers will also be resurrected, but they will be raised for a body of destruction, not in a body for eternal life. So, when the Lord returns, there will be a resurrection, and when all the living and the dead are gathered together, they will be judged by the appointed man, Jesus Christ. This is mentioned in Revelation 20, as well as other Scriptures.

Let’s look at one final passage concerning these last things. Please read Matthew 25:31-46; I will not include its entirety due to its length, but I will include some excerpts. **“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats...Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come,’...Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me,’...And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”** Once again, we see the biblical teaching that Jesus will return to judge all mankind, determining each person’s everlasting fate based upon how they have lived. Notice something extremely serious here. The things we do, the words we say, the things we do not do, the things we think, the things we feel—all of them will be judged by God clearly for what they are. When he looks at all of our

life, he will make a decision on whether we should be punished for our sin or be ushered into his blissful paradise. What we do matters greatly. Our sin truly is this grievous, so much so that it deserves eternal damnation. Each thing we do has an eternal consequence since everything is in the sight of the Lord. This is why faith is so important. When God looks on our life, he finds sin, and plenty of it. All that we earn in our life is condemnation. Yet, if we trust in Jesus' sacrifice for our sins, then all our sins that were held against us will be forgiven. Then, the Judge will not condemn us for our sin because he sees that they have been removed by the blood of Christ. Jesus Christ has taken our punishment in our place if we are in Christ. God will not punish us for our sins when Jesus has already been punished for us. God will accept us through Jesus Christ, and through him alone. May God find that our lives have been lived by faith in his Son.

Hell is described in the Bible as the second death, the lake of fire, outer darkness, and a place of weeping, gnashing of teeth, and where the worm does not die. Nothing about it is pleasant, it is a place of horrible torture and anguish forever. It is eternal; there will be no relief or end to that destruction. It is a place far removed from the merciful presence of God. It turns out that when sinners are sent to hell, God is actually giving them what they have always wanted. That sounds odd, but it is true in a sense. Sinners seek to live a life apart from God, wanting nothing to do with him. So, in the end, God gives them what life truly is apart from God, and it is far worse than they ever imagined.

Heaven is described in the Bible as eternal life, paradise, the land of light where joy and righteous abide unharmed forever. In fact, the Bible says that when Jesus returns, he will make all things new, not just by the resurrection from the dead, but also by renewing the heavens and the earth. When that happens God will dwell with mankind—those who are the redeemed—and heaven and earth will be in perfect union. The new heavens and the new earth is our promised future dwelling place. Yet, for all of its goodness, the glory of the new world will be chiefly seen in God himself. God is the goal of the Christian life, not merely heaven. If what we are most excited about in heaven is not God, then we must evaluate what kind of love we even have for God. He is the greatest being ever, and no one can compare with him. Nothing is more lovely, praiseworthy, or majestic than God.

We have seen the polar opposites of heaven and hell as properly depicted in the Bible. Know that the path to both of them is before us. Choose the way of the Good Shepherd.