

Death and the Afterlife: Eternity Decided in Time

by Dr. John Ankerberg, Dr. John Weldon

In contrast to the teachings of some cults, death is not merely an illusion, or something good, or eternal extinction, or an inevitable door to heaven or the next life, or multiple lives (reincarnation). Further, heaven is not merely a positive experience in life, such as feeling good, or a higher state of consciousness. Hell is not a negative condition in life, or a temporary purgatory, or the consequences of unenlightened consciousness in this life.

Death *per se* is a condition of *separation*. According to the Bible, there are only two kinds of death. First, there is physical death, which involves the *temporary* separation of the spirit from the body. In the resurrection, the body is later rejoined with the human spirit. Second, there is eternal spiritual death, or the *eternal* separation of the human spirit from God. This condition has no remedy. Death is not good; it has never been good. Physical death—separation from the body—is not good, since by it man is left “unclothed” in an unnatural state (2 Cor. 5:4; Phil. 3:21; 1 Cor. 15:53-54). Spiritual death—separation from God—is not good, since by it one is eternally separated from God.

“Death” and “life” are irreconcilable and opposite *conditions of existence* in both this life and the next. Apart from Christ, death leads to one thing only: eternal judgment. “It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment” (Heb. 9:27). But *with* Christ, death leads to life. “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die” (John 11:25-26). “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (John 5:24).

The Bible teaches that prior to salvation, even as they are alive, all men and women exist in a state of spiritual death or separation from God. Their human spirits are “dead” to those things that God is truly concerned about (Luke 15:24-32; Eph. 2:1; 1 Tim. 5:6, Rev. 3:1). Thus, even though they are alive physically, they do not consider the one true God, nor do they honor Him or care about His interests. Whatever God or concept of God they may believe in, they do not concern themselves with the concerns of the one true God (Rom. 3:10-18). This is why Jesus Himself referred to “the dead burying their own dead,” explicitly teaching that the living human beings around him were, as far as God was concerned, spiritually dead (Luke 9:60).

The Bible teaches that physical and spiritual death exists for one reason: sin. God warned Adam and Eve that if they disobeyed Him, in that day they would die (Gen. 2:17). They died first spiritually and then physically. This is why the Bible teaches, “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23).

Because sin causes death, the problem of sin must be dealt with before death can be dealt with. This is the reason for the Christian teaching on the atonement: that Christ died for the sins of the world. As Jesus taught, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Whoever receives Christ as personal savior is “born again,” regenerated, made alive spiritually. The believer’s state of spiritual death is cancelled at the point of receiving Christ. Since Christ paid the full penalty of sin (Col. 2:13), there is no longer the possibility of the believer suffering God’s judgment for his sins, which is the second death. Instead, the believer will join God forever at the point of physical death. This is the essence of the term “saved.” And it must be stressed that people must come to belief in the atoning death of Jesus Christ or they cannot be saved. The only condition is to accept what God has done in the person of Christ. Thus, the biblical view is that the saved are with God; they go to be with Him at the moment of death (Luke 23:43; John 12:26; Acts 7:59; 2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23).

The Christian hope, then, is not a cultic or mediumistic view of gradual, spiritual self-progression after death but in physical resurrection and eternal immortality based on Christ’s resurrection and life (Rom. 4:25; 1 Cor. 6:14; 2 Cor. 4:14; 5:1; Eph. 1:15-21; 2:4-10; Phil. 1:21; 3:21; Col. 3:4). Those who accept Christ inherit heaven for eternity; those who reject God and His mercy inherit hell for eternity (2 Pet. 2:4, 9). There is no possibility of altering one’s fate after death (Heb. 9:27; Luke 16:19-31).

Death, then, is not extinction, as many cults teach. It does not involve a condition of reincarnation, where the soul experiences many lifetimes, as occult religions teach. It does not involve a condition of ultimate union or absorption into some impersonal, divine essence as many Eastern cults teach. (See Eccl. 12:5; Luke 12:46-47; Luke 16:19-31; Acts 1:25; Heb. 9:27; Psa. 78:39; 2 Cor. 5:11; Heb. 10:31; 12:27-29; 2 Pet. 2:4, 9; Rev. 20:10,15).

What Will Heaven Be Like?

The Bible clearly teaches the existence of a place called heaven:

Our Father in heaven.... (Matt. 6:9)

You will have treasure in heaven.... (Matt. 19:21)

He was taken up into heaven.... (Mark 16:19)

No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. (John 3:13)

You also have a Master in heaven.... (Col. 4:1)

To wait for his Son from heaven.... (1 Thess. 1:10)

He himself will come down from heaven.... (1 Thess. 4:16)

Many good books have been written on heaven and we would encourage the reader to read these for greater insights into the eternal existence of the redeemed.¹

Heaven is not a perpetual vacation—something that would be terribly boring after only fifty years, let alone for endless time. Heaven is an eternity of purpose and destiny. After the largest conceivable amount of time multiplied by the largest conceivable amount of time, eternity has only just begun. Therefore, heaven must not only be beyond our imagination but also commensurate with the nature and demands of a redeemed eternity itself. Heaven will be an infinitely superb, multi-faceted and glorious paradise because an infinitely superb, multi-faceted, glorious God lives there. Words such as grandeur, exquisite, magnificent, marvelous, resplendent, elegant and super luxurious are, at best, shadows of its descriptions. Heaven

is a real and substantial place for real and substantial people. In this place, Jesus told us that we would be glorified and exalted with Him. We will have spiritual bodies (Eph. 2:6; Rom. 8:11-17; Phil.3:21,1 John 3:2), and will reign with Him “forever and ever” (Rev. 20:6; 22:5). We will also judge (and perhaps rule) the angels (1 Cor. 6:3).

In heaven everything that makes life unpleasant or tortuous will be forever vanquished. Those present in heaven will never experience pain, sadness, sorrow, depression, sickness, death, sin, evil, selfishness, fatigue or suffering of any kind, “for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev. 21:4; 22:3). Heaven will be a place of indescribable love, beauty, peace, joy, happiness, rest, adventure, excitement, union and fellowship with God (Rev. 21:3)—multiplied to the degree suggested by what an infinitely loving, omnipotent and omniscient God would do in eternity for those He willingly sacrificed His only Son for. Scripture itself teaches that if God has given us His only Son now, how much more will He give us throughout eternity? (Rom. 8:32; 1 Cor. 2:9; 3:21-23).

Life in heaven will be beyond our wildest imagination. If heaven by definition is devoid of everything old that is negative, it must be saturated with everything new that is positive. “He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’ Then he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true’” (Rev. 21:5). Thus heaven will be a place of eternal security and protection where God’s creation is redeemed and transformed into an absolutely perfect new earth and heavens (Rom. 8:18-23; Rev. chs. 21,22).

In this never to be equaled universe, which could be inexhaustible, we will be able to explore and never exhaust the ability to explore, just as we will never be able to exhaust our exploration of all there is to know and experience of an infinite God in all His perfections. Obviously, since people are finite beings, there will be never-ending growth in knowledge, truth and wisdom, of God and perhaps of the creation, angels and men and women. We will not only have joyous, intimate, personal fellowship with God, Jesus and the angels but with billions of redeemed people throughout history, and with whatever else God may have created. Yet service and worship to God will be one of our *greatest* joys. As suggested by the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-23; Luke 19:11-26), we will also enjoy rewards for service given on earth. These will probably include different positions of honor and authority in heaven. However, all our heavenly blessings and glories will be eternal and indestructible (1 Pet. 1:3-4).

But it must also be remembered there is far, far more that we don’t know about heaven than we do know; its beauties and glories are indescribable to us now. First Corinthians 2:9 only hints at what awaits those who have made Jesus their Lord and Savior: “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him.” Indeed, “our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18). In sum, we will inherit all that God *is* and all that God *has* (1 Cor. 3:21-23) in a true eternal paradise as God originally intended it. As a result, “the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” forever and ever (Matt. 13:43). We should expect nothing less from a future kingdom prepared by Jesus Himself, for those He dearly loves and died for personally (Matt. 25:34; John 14:2).

This helps explain why apart from Christ there is no such thing as *real* life, either now or in eternity.

What Will Hell Be Like?

Just as with the doctrine of heaven, the Bible is clear that there is an eternal place

termed hell:

Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment. (Luke 16:28)

In danger of the fire of hell.... (Matthew 5:22)

God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell. (2 Peter 2:4)

Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. (Matthew 10:28)

They will go away to eternal punishment. (Matthew 25:46)

Who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.... (Jude 7)

Hell may be ridiculed and outdated in the minds of many people, but that does not eliminate its reality. Given the infinite holiness of God, one thing is certain: the strongest arguments against hell will be silenced forever on the other side. (Polls since 1944 indicate that although 50 to 60 percent of people believe in hell, only 3 to 4 percent think their chances are good of going there.²) Many people think they will never go to hell because they don't "deserve" it. But popular views of Universalism (all will be saved), variations on conditional immortality (the unsaved will be annihilated), and ideas of the opportunity for salvation after death are impossible to defend scripturally.³ Because of God's infinite righteousness, hell cannot logically be considered immoral. But it could actually be immoral for God to save everyone irrespective of their will, or to annihilate those having intrinsic value, those created in His image.⁴

The most predominant feature of hell will be the eternal absence of an infinitely loving God and the never-ending presence of just punishments for individual sins (2 Thess. 1:9; Daniel 12:2; Matthew 10:28). Hell apparently involves degrees of punishment according to the works done in this life (Matthew 11:21-24; 23:23; Luke 12:47-48). In contrast to what most people think, those who are condemned to hell will recognize, and accept, the perfect justice of their presence there. Hell is a subject that all people should contemplate for many reasons. Among them⁵ are the following.

1) God Himself does not desire that anyone perish, and He has done all He can, this side of death, within the limits of His character and the human condition, to save people (2 Peter 3:9; Acts 17:26-31). It is entirely possible that, given God's infinite knowledge of what every possible created being would do under every possible circumstance, God has so structured human existence so as to save the greatest number. Further, it is equally credible that "of all the possible persons God could have created, the vast majority of those who would have rejected Christ never get created in the first place. The number of people who reject Christ may be an act of mercy on God's part."⁶ It is even possible that, given God's holy character and human responsibility, there is *no* world God could have created in which all created persons would have freely accepted Christ. Apparently, "God prefers a world in which some persons freely reject Christ but the number of saved is maximized over a world in which a few trust Christ and none are lost." Thus, "The actual world contains an optimal balance between saved and unsaved, and those who are unsaved would never have received Christ under any circumstances."⁷

2) It is obviously in our own best interest to escape going to hell. Apart from Christ, hell is assured, but this fate can easily be avoided in this life by trust in Jesus for forgiveness of sin (John 1:12; 3:16-18; 5:24; 6:47).

3) Hell is not unjust. The one true God who has revealed Himself as *infinitely* loving and merciful has also spoken of the reality of eternal separation from Him; therefore the doc-

trine of hell cannot be inconsistent with His love, justice or mercy. Few people balk at the devil going to hell because they assume the devil is bad enough and God just enough to warrant it. Only when it comes to *us* do we question its justness. But if it is just for the devil, can we assume it is never just for those of us who are “like” the devil in attitudes and actions, especially as they are directed toward God? (See John 8:44; 1 John 3:8.) Indeed, apart from hell, justice itself becomes a myth. All creation will one day understand this (Romans 3:4-6). Even if someone like Adolph Hitler were punished for billions of years and then brought into eternal heaven or annihilated, his time of punishment, compared to eternity, would be essentially meaningless.

4) Hell is not a place where God actively tortures people endlessly as if He were the director of some kind of torture chamber. Hell was made for the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41), not men and women. But people who continue their rebellion against God must suffer the just judgment of their sins. Since God will not permit unrighteousness or anything unholy to enter heaven (Revelation 21:27; Habakkuk 1:13), there must be some other place for the unrighteous to inhabit eternity. And if the unrighteous are not permanently quarantined from the righteous, all we have is an instant and eternal replay of life on earth, and this is surely not heaven! There will be psychological and physical anguish and torment in hell, but this will result primarily from the conditions of hell and people’s own choices and realizations, not from God Himself actively inflicting their torment. A judge and jury who justly send a man to prison do not torment him; his own choices and the conditions of prison do.

5) Sin committed against God is not like sin committed against others. Sinning against an infinite being requires an infinite punishment which, for finite creatures, can only be experienced as eternal punishment. Further, the amount of time it takes to commit a sin has no direct relationship to the punishment it deserves. A bank teller may plan a robbery for months, while his accomplice may murder someone in a moment. The evil of a crime is related more to the nature of the crime and the one against whom it is committed than the time it takes to commit it. No one can accurately gauge how an infinite God, whose holiness is immeasurable, responds to even the smallest human sin. One would think that for a literally infinitely holy Being, even the most minute human sin would be fully heinous and worthy of eternal separation. Also, because the unredeemed *are* unredeemed, they continue to sin *after* death and apparently will continue to sin inwardly *forever* (Matthew 8:12). But the only *just* punishment for eternal sin is eternal punishment. The bottom line is that a good God cannot be unjust in punishing people eternally. What hell means is that there *is* final justice and that hell is no more or less than *perfect* justice (Romans 3:4-6). If, in this life, few things are as satisfying as justice, this must also be true in the next life. And hell must also be in full harmony with the love of God. “God loves justice, holiness, and righteousness so much that He created hell. The love of God for His own nature, His law, His universe, and His people, makes hell a product of love as well as justice.”⁸

6) Our choice *for* God is important to Him (Luke 13:34). People who refuse Christ in this life would be quite unlikely to accept Him in the next life, in hell, because their basic nature is not altered. If Scripture declares that the unredeemed are God’s enemies who want nothing to do with Him (Acts 4:25-27; Romans 1:18-32; 5:6-10), why would anything change just because someone died? Even if they somehow did decide for Christ, it would only be to escape the punishments of hell rather than to love and obey God. They would not be choosing God and Jesus on their own merits, and thus they would not be suited for

eternal life with God and Jesus in heaven. No one wants to live forever with someone the person dislikes. The more we understand the nature of heaven as being infused with the nature of God, the more credible is the idea that the unredeemed would not enjoy heaven either.

Of course, the longer we refuse God's gift of mercy now, the harder it becomes to accept it later. Every day, in almost every way, we are either moving closer to God or further from Him. At the end of an unrepentant life, God simply grants our wishes. C. S. Lewis emphasized, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.'" ⁴⁹ In another book, Lewis writes:

If a game is played it must be possible to lose it. If the happiness of a creature lies in self-surrender, no one can make that surrender but himself (though many can help him to make it) and he may refuse. I would pay any price to be able to say truthfully "all will be saved." But my reason retorts, "without their will, or with it?" If I say, "without their will" I at once perceive a contradiction; how can the supreme voluntary act of self-surrender be involuntary? If I say "with their will," my reason replies "how if they *will* not give in?"¹⁰

7) The punishment in hell is apparently tempered for some. God can only do what is just in this life and the next. Hebrews 11:6 says that God rewards those who seek Him. Acts 10:35 says, "In every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him." Abraham asked, "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis 18:25) The psalmist said, "He will judge the world with justice and the peoples with unfaltering fairness" (Psalm 98:9). Thus, not everyone experiences the same degree of pain in hell, since there are apparently degrees of punishment. The person who did not know God's will and did not do it will receive "but few" stripes (Luke 12:35-48; Matthew 10:15). It makes sense to believe that those who were less evil in this life are not punished to the same degree as those who were more evil, because God is unable to violate His holy character and give any person *more* punishment than he or she deserves. This means that God, who is infinite in knowledge, knows the perfectly deserved and righteous punishment for every person who has ever lived. In the end, although hell is not what the unrighteous want, it will be seen to be what the unrighteous deserve.

Notes:

¹ For example, John Gilmore, *Probing Heaven: Key Questions on the Hereafter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989); Joni Eareckson Tada, *Heaven Your Real Home* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995); Gary R. Habermas and J. P. Moreland, *Immortality the Other Side of Death* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992).

² John Ankerberg, John Weldon, *The Facts on UFOs and Other Supernatural Phenomena* and *The Facts on Spirit Guides* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1992).

³ For detailed refutation, see Robert A. Morey, *Death and the Afterlife* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1984).

⁴ Gary R. Habermas and J. P. Moreland, *Immortality the Other Side of Death* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992). pp. 169-71.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 157-80.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

⁸ Robert A. Morey, *Introduction to Defending the Faith* (Southbridge, MA: Crowne Publications, 1989), p. 38e.

⁹ C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: MacMillan, 1946), p. 69.

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: MacMillan, 1971), p. 8.