

Heaven & Hell – What Should I Believe?

1. Warm-up question: When you get to heaven, after you see Jesus and your loved ones, who's the first person you've read about in history or the Bible that you hope to get acquainted with?
2. On Sunday, before diving into our discussion of heaven and hell, Jeff reminded us that we should approach subjects like this with a deep sense of doctrinal humility. As finite creatures trapped in space/time, there are significant limitations on our ability to understand infinite realities. Heaven and hell, by definition, exist outside our typical human frame of reference.
 - a. If you want to be reminded of the limits of our human ability to grasp infinite realities, just think about the cosmos. Do you believe the cosmos has an end point way out there somewhere or that it goes on forever and ever? Can you fathom either option? When do you believe the cosmos began? Did it ever not exist or has it always been? Can you fathom either option?
 - b. Imagine you're an infinite God trying to explain infinite reality to us finite creatures. The only way to do it is to explain things like heaven and hell by analogizing them to things we have experienced in the human realm – kind of like how we explain complex things to children at an age-appropriate level. Jeff said, "That's what's happening when the Bible tells us about heaven. God has to explain it at a level we can understand by analogizing it to things we're familiar with. So, for example, God says, 'Imagine streets of gold and gates of pearl.' Will there literally be streets of gold and gates of pearl in heaven? I doubt it. But at least that analogy begins to give us a sense of how amazing heaven will be." Critique what Jeff said. Does it resonate or not – and why?
 - c. I Corinthians 2:9 says, "No eye has seen, or ear heard, or mind imagined . . . the things God has prepared for those who love him." What are the implications of that verse for our ability to understand heaven?
3. Bearing in mind all the foregoing qualifications, let's now ponder what John says about heaven in the book of Revelation. Read Revelation 21:1-5 and 22-26.
 - a. What word or phrase in this reading most catches your eye – and why?
 - b. Verse 3 indicates that heaven will be a place where we dwell in the direct presence of God. What do you think it will feel like to experience the direct presence of God?
 - c. Verse 4 indicates that, in heaven, there will be no more death, mourning, pain, or sorrow. That means no more separation from departed loved ones. Who's the *first* loved one you hope to reconnect with in heaven? What do you think that will feel like?

- d. Verses 22 – 26 describe the appearance/presence of God and Jesus in heaven as pure light, as bright as the sun. Do you think that’s metaphorical or that God’s presence in heaven will literally be in the form of brilliant light?
4. As we ponder heaven, it leads to an obvious question: Who gets into heaven? John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whosoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life.” The kind of belief mentioned here is not casual belief. In John 3:8, Jesus says it needs to be a belief that runs so deep it feels like being born again, like being born to a whole new way of life.
- a. I John 2:18 says, “You have heard that [the] antichrist is coming, but even now many antichrists have come [into the world].” Jeff defined an antichrist as someone who claims the name of Jesus, but doesn’t really follow him. It’s the difference is between people who know Jesus in their head versus in their heart. What’s the difference between “head knowledge” and “heart knowledge” of Jesus?
 - b. Have you ever known someone who knew a lot about Jesus, but never seemed to know the heart of Jesus? Tell us about them.
 - c. Have you ever known someone who knew little or nothing about Jesus, but seem to intuitively know him in their heart? Tell us about them.
5. After talking about heaven, we then turned to hell. Lots of people would rather not believe in hell, but Jeff suggested hell “makes sense.” If people who reject God and the values of God were let into heaven, heaven would be earth all over again – a maddening mixture of both good and evil. If God wanted to give us humans a genuine choice whether we want to be with him or not, God was compelled to create an alternate destination for those who reject him. The Greek word for hell – *gehenna* – is linguistically derived from the Valley of Hinnom, a beautiful mountain valley that God created, but humans trashed and literally turned into a garbage dump.
- a. The term *gehenna* suggests that God created hell to be a beautiful alternative destination for unbelievers, but unbelievers – by their twisted values – end up trashing it and making it a living hell. In this view, hell is not a place of literal fire and deliberate torment, but rather a place that’s unbearable because of those who live there. How does this view of hell sit with you? Do you buy it?
 - b. Read I Peter 3:18-20 and 4:6 as printed on p. 3, then come back to this question: The verses we just read indicate that, after his death, Jesus descended into hell to offer the souls there a second chance to “live in the spirit as God does.” Jeff said, “If Jesus has already done that once, what’s to keep him from doing it again and again till finally everyone finds their way home to God.” Your thoughts?
 - c. How does the view of hell we’ve been discussing differ from traditional views of hell you may have been taught? Which view makes more sense to you – and why?

Revelation 21:1-5 and 22-26

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.'

⁵ And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.'

²² I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. ²⁵Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. ²⁶People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.

I Peter 3:18-20 and 4:6

¹⁸For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, ²⁰who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently. . . .

⁶For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, though they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit as God does.