

The Reality of Heaven and Hell

Series: Heaven and Hell: Separating Fact from Fiction

Revelation 21:1-8

August 14, 2016

Welcome everyone. I'm so glad you are here, and I'm glad to be here as well. Last week, 9 of us from Germantown went to a Christian Ashram – a retreat in the beautiful mountains of West Virginia. We had a wonderful time growing closer to God through Bible Study, prayer, preaching, and sharing. We're going back next year, and would like for you to join us.

While we were there, our Bible Study teacher reminded us that in the last few years, there has been a great deal of interest in heaven. There are a number of books out there, including best sellers, that talk about heaven, including those written by people who said they died, went and saw heaven, then came back to life.

Well, I thought we might spend a few weeks looking at the hereafter in our series "Heaven and Hell: Separating Fact from Fiction." We are going to focus on the questions:

- Where Do You Go After You Die?
- Will We Know Our Loved Ones?
- When Will the Rest of Us Go?

Today, we are going to deal with the Reality of Heaven and Hell.

I want to invite you to turn in your Bible – you are bringing your Bible to church aren't you? – to Revelation 21. The last book of the Bible.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever." And the one sitting on the throne said, "Look, I am making everything new!" And then he said to me, "Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true." And he also said, "It is finished! I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End. To all who are thirsty I will give freely from the springs of the water of life. All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children. "But cowards, unbelievers, the corrupt, murderers, the immoral, those who practice witchcraft, idol worshipers, and all liars—their fate is in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."¹

In this vision, John sees a new heaven. Now, I don't know what was wrong with the old heaven, but it is clear that at the end, God will make everything new, including heaven. It will be a great place. God will be with us. There will be no more tears or sorrow or crying or pain.

John also says that there is another place: the fiery lake of burning sulfur, where there is punishment for the wicked dead.

¹ Revelation 21:1-8 (NLT)

Jesus echoes this in Matthew

*The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*²

The Bible is absolutely clear that there is a heaven – a place where we are with God, and a hell – place where we are eternally separated from God.

The question then is heaven for everyone? Will every human who's ever lived end up in heaven in the end? Or are certain people just not "heaven people"? And why is there a hell when everyone ultimately ends up in heaven?

Now the belief that everyone will ultimately be in heaven is what theologians call Universalism. If you've ever seen the Unitarian Universalist Church, that's what they believe, that everyone will be heaven in the end. The 2nd century church leader Origen believed this... in fact Origen even thought the Devil would ultimately end up in heaven. Diverse people throughout the ages have embraced universalism. But what does the Bible teach?

Let's look at the teachings of Jesus Christ on this issue. He said in Matthew 7:13-14:

*Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.*³

According to Jesus, there's a right way and a wrong way in the spiritual life. There's a way that ends in destruction and a way that ends in life. The path that leads to destruction is described as having a wide gate and a broad path. It's a well-worn road, it's a road paved with "good intentions" as we like to say. Yet it ends in destruction, and the word here describes "eternal destruction."

In contrast to this easy way, this common way, there's a narrow gate, a gate with only a single entrance, and this narrow gate leads to the narrow road of following Jesus, a road of eternal life, a road of blessing. This is where we get the saying "straight and narrow" from in our culture.

The rock musicians got it right: there is a highway to heaven – big and broad – and there is a stairway to heaven – narrow and thin.

What we find in this teaching of Jesus is a warning that not every road leads to heaven. I didn't make this up. It's not an arrogant claim that my way is better than someone else's way, but it's the clear teaching of Jesus here.

It's popular in our culture today to believe that all roads ultimately lead to heaven. The spiritual life is often pictured as a mountain, with heaven on top of the mountain, and every religion taking its own unique path up the mountain, but all paths end up at the same destination.

But if that's true, then it must be true that all religions without distinction ultimately end in heaven. When we think about that, it poses a problem, because Satanism is also a religion, as well as some religions that practice human sacrifice. These religions must also be equally valid ways of approaching God if every road leads to heaven.

² Matthew 13:41-42 (NIV)

³ Matthew 7:13-14 (NIV)

You see, if we can't make distinctions between truth and error when it comes to religion, then we must include all religions, including ones that have practices that we find repulsive and immoral.

Christian philosopher Peter Kreeft says, "If all roads lead to the same place it makes no ultimate difference which road we take."⁴ Our spiritual beliefs end up being no more significant than ice cream flavors; they become strictly a matter of personal preference. In fact, even the road of non-religion must be an equally valid road.

This kind of thinking has another major problem with it as well. For all people to ultimately end up in heaven, God would have to force some people to be there. You see, the Bible teaches that God has given us the freedom to reject His plan, the freedom to spurn His love, the freedom to reject His offer of heaven. God didn't have to give us that freedom – in fact He could override our freedom at any time – yet He's given us this freedom nonetheless. So if everyone ultimately ends up in heaven, God must overpower some people's will and force them to be there even though they'd choose not to be.

If everyone ends up in heaven – including people who didn't want to be there – then heaven will be just as bad as earth. Oxford theologian Alister McGrath is exactly right when he says, "Universalism denies humanity the right to say no to God."⁵

The clear teaching of Jesus is contrary to universalism, as Jesus warns us that the broad road doesn't lead to heaven at all, but that it leads to a much more disastrous destination. So the answer of Jesus is no, not all will end up in heaven.

That leads us to another question: What's the entrance requirement for heaven? If entrance into heaven isn't automatic, then what's the deciding factor?

The first place we look to for what qualifies entrance into heaven is our own merits. After all, every other religion of the world presents its own unique method of gaining merit for the afterlife, to try to earn our way into bliss. Whether it's Buddhism's eightfold path to nirvana, Islam's four pillars, or Hinduism's cycle of reincarnation and karma, every major world religion presents a "do it yourself" way to gain merit for the afterlife.

Multiply these major religions a hundredfold and you'll find all kinds of cults and sectarian groups promising their own brand of merit to earn access to heaven, whether it's the Hare Krishnas, the Moonies, Scientology, or whatever. According to a survey by Time magazine several years ago, 62% of Americans think our merits play a role in determining whether we end up in heaven or not.

Yet when it comes to our own merits, the Bible presents a very unflattering picture. We'll never make it by our own merits.

Isaiah 64:6 says:

*All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts [or our merits if you will] are like filthy rags...*⁶

The best we have to offer to present ourselves as deserving heaven is woefully inadequate. We're like Cinderella trying to get into the big dance with only our peasant's

⁴ Peter Kreeft, *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Heaven* (Ignatius Press, 1990), p. 214.

⁵ Alister McGrath, "A Particularist View: A Post-Enlightenment Approach" in *More Than One Way? Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* editors D. Okholm and T. R. Phillips (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), p. 177.

⁶ Isaiah 64:6a (NIV)

smock. The best we have to wear won't get is through the front door. We need something beyond what we can provide for ourselves, we need Cinderella's fairy godmother to provide a heavenly gown.

You see, for all our attempts to do the right thing, all of us have miserably failed. This is why the Bible tells us very bluntly:

*For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard.*⁷

We've blown it, we've sinned, and that's caused us to be in a state of moral uncleanness, a condition of alienation and hostility from God. We've been quarantined from God's perfect goodness and holiness.

Instead, the Bible offers us a different way to find entrance into heaven.

*For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ.*⁸

The only person who doesn't stand before God unclean and in filthy rags is Jesus Christ. According to the Bible, Jesus never sinned, not once did He break God's law, not once did he fail to obey God to the full. This is hard for us to even imagine since all of us have grown so accustomed to failure and sin in our own lives, yet this is the clear claim of the Bible. Yet this one person who stands before God righteous became the offering for our sin.

Without the sinless sacrifice of Jesus Christ, all we have to rely on for entrance into heaven is our own merit. So without the sacrifice of Jesus, no one would end up in heaven. This claim that sounds so exclusive, so restrictive, so dogmatic, is the clear teaching of the New Testament, and it's been the position of the Christian community for 2,000 years now. Buddha might have been an enlightened teacher, but he can't save people from sin. Muhammad may have inspired people, Moses might have led a nation out of slavery, Ghandi might have helped India find freedom through non-violent resistance, but the names of Muhammad, Moses, and Ghandi cannot save people.

You see, as long as we're clinging to our filthy rags to defend ourselves before God, we're not ready to receive the gift that Christ offers. We find ourselves tightly grasping our own merits, white knuckling our own efforts, and our hands aren't open to receive the gift. We're like the little boy who reaches into a vase to pull out a piece of candy. As long as we hold on to the candy in our hand, we can't get our hand out of the vase. As long as we hold onto our filthy rags, we can't receive the gift God offers through Christ.

Entrance into heaven is an undeserved gift that's made possible through faith in Jesus Christ.

This is why it's not arrogant for Christians to claim that Jesus is the only way to heaven. Christ does not claim to be a man who became a way to God. Christianity claims to be the road God [himself] made down, not the road we made up."

It's not arrogance for one person in a burning building to show the other people where the fire escape is. It's not arrogance for a doctor to prescribe a medication because that medication will provide healing from the disease.

Jesus is the only way, and we recognize that every time we share in communion.

⁷ Romans 3:23 (NLT)

⁸ 2 Corinthians 5:21 (NLT)