

“Heaven and Hell”

During the first few months of 2017, Calvary Baptist Church studied the doctrine of Heaven and Hell. Over the centuries, society has portrayed these two destinations in a variety of ways. But are these portrayals Biblical? What does Scripture actually teach about Heaven and Hell? Summaries of the sermons preached during this series are included in this book.

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What is Hell Like?

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“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.” - Matthew 7:13-14

This morning we are beginning a new study on the doctrine of Heaven and Hell. We will spend the next several weeks thoroughly examining each of these locations and will learn much of what the Bible has to say about them. In the first half of the study we will focus our attention on Hell, and then shift to Heaven in the second half. We will discover some stark differences between these two destinations, along with some surprising similarities. It is my hope that our Biblical understanding of both Heaven and Hell will grow as a result of these messages.

While most people believe in the existence of Heaven, far fewer accept the reality of Hell. The thought that such a horrific place would exist is appalling to many. They cannot fathom that God would condemn people to such a fate. The world simply does not want to accept the uncomfortable truth that Hell is real, and thus many people simply deny its existence. But refusing to accept that something is true does not automatically make it false...

The fact is that the Bible speaks much more about Hell than it does about Heaven. In fact, I've heard from other pastors and teachers that there is almost three times more material about Hell than about Heaven in Scripture. In the Gospels Jesus personally gave 70 warnings about Hell. Those who accept one place as true and reject the the other as false are cherry-picking only the portions of Scripture that they like. While Hell is certainly a frightful place to consider, it is undoubtedly a real place that is spoken about extensively in the Word of God. It is quite foolish and naive to believe that Heaven is a real place while Hell isn't.

In this first message of our new series, we are going to paint a Biblical description of Hell. Modern culture often depicts it in a silly, frivolous manner - such as in animated children's cartoons. But the Hell of the Bible is much more serious and daunting than the world pictures it. While Scripture does not tell us everything about this terrible place, it does provide us with some chilling details. This morning we will examine a small sampling of verses and passages that describe Hell. These descriptors provide us with a glimpse of what Hell is actually like, and give us ample reason to avoid going there.

I. UNQUENCHABLE FIRE

"The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" - Matthew 13:41-42

"If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire," - Mark 9:43

And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.' - Luke 16:24

One of the most widely used descriptions of Hell is that of fire. When God rained fire and brimstone down upon the Old Testament cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, He gave us an indication of the nature of His judgment. In numerous statements Jesus described Hell using the imagery of fire with words such as furnace and flames. In the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, we read that the rich man cries out while agonizing in the flames of Hell.

The fire of Hell clearly represents the physical suffering that takes place there. Because the fire is unquenchable, it rages continually without ever being extinguished. Stated another way, those who are cast into the fire will burn perpetually. They will have physical bodies that will burn yet not be consumed. If you have ever been burned, you know the misery that it brings. The intensity of the physical pain that will take place in Hell is hard to imagine or express.

II. OUTER DARKNESS

Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' - Matthew 22:13

These are the men who are hidden reefs in your love feasts when they feast with you without fear, caring for themselves; clouds without water, carried along by winds; autumn trees without fruit, doubly dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up their own shame like foam; wandering stars, for whom the black darkness has been reserved forever. - Jude 1:12-13

Hell will be a place of darkness that will envelop those who are confined there. Not only will it be darkness, but outer darkness which implies a great distance from any source of light. Those in Hell will be in a remote place, far from any comforts. The fiery flames of Hell seem to contradict the idea of darkness. In our human understanding, flames produce light and have been used for centuries to dispel darkness. But in hell, if we interpret these verses literally, the fires will burn black and the darkness will persist.

The outer darkness speaks to the psychological suffering that will take place in Hell. Perpetual darkness tends to bring about gloom and depression. While Scripture does not expressly rule out any communication with others in Hell, certainly a thick blanket of darkness would lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation. Anyone who has spent time alone in the dark understands the feelings of fright and uneasiness that it brings. The utter darkness of Hell will cause both both horror and solitude for those who are there.

III. WEeping AND GNASHING OF TEETH

"but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." - Matthew 8:12

"and He will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you are from; depart from Me, all you evildoers.' In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves being thrown out." - Luke 13:27-28

Hell will also be a place characterized by weeping and gnashing of teeth. The sounds of weeping and wailing will echo continuously through Hell, further terrorizing those who hear it. While weeping is a pretty simple term to understand, gnashing of teeth is a bit more difficult. It means to grind one's teeth together. In different passages in the Bible we see this happen when people are in great pain or when they are extremely angry. Figuratively speaking, this phrase points to both the anguish and the fury of Hell.

The weeping and gnashing of teeth reflect the emotional suffering that will torment those in Hell. The weeping will come not only as a reaction to the physical pain, but also because of intense grief, remorse, and regret. The condemned will lament over the decisions that they made, and will worry about the fate others who might make the same decisions. The feelings of sadness and bitterness will weigh heavily upon those imprisoned in Hell. It will be a place of emotional misery.

IV. UNDYING WORM

"If your eye causes you to stumble, throw it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than, having two eyes, to be cast into hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched." - Mark 8:47-48

"Then they will go forth and look on the corpses of the men who have transgressed against Me. For their worm will not die and their fire will not be quenched; and they will be an abhorrence to all mankind." - Isaiah 66:24

One of the most unsettling descriptions of Hell is that it is a place where the worm never dies. Jesus compared the realm of Hell with the Valley of Hinnom. In this valley, just south of Jerusalem, some of the Old Testament kings sacrificed their children by fire to pagan gods. Because of these grave atrocities, the valley was considered to be cursed. According to many Bible teachers, this place eventually became the city dump where anything considered unclean was discarded and incinerated. The dead bodies of executed criminals, along with many other such things, were cast into the smoldering heap where maggots swarmed and fed on their decaying flesh.

The undying worm has been interpreted by some to symbolically represent a person's conscience. They suggest that guilty thoughts - like maggots - will continually gnaw upon those who have been condemned to Hell causing unending restlessness and agitation. This image highlights the ongoing mental torment that will haunt those who are lost in Hell. The thoughts, memories, and considerations of their minds will continually consume them with guilt and shame.

CONCLUSION

Hell is a literal place where the condemned will suffer in numerous ways. They will experience excruciating physical pain from the unquenchable flames. They will tremble in fear and psychological torment caused by the outer darkness. They will feel the emotional exhaustion of continual weeping and sadness. They will be tormented by unshakable thoughts of guilt, shame, and remorse that slowly consume their minds like maggots eating flesh. The horrors of hell will be all-encompassing and beyond our imagination. No matter how awful you imagine that Hell will be like, I can assure you that it will be far worse.

The world wants to discount or dismiss Hell as something that needs not be taken seriously. They teach that it either doesn't exist at all, or if it does, that it's not going to be that bad. But the Bible paints a very different picture indeed. The Scriptural description of Hell is absolutely terrifying. When we understand this, it should cause us to avoid it at all costs and should compel us to warn others to do likewise.

Next week we will continue our description of Hell. We will search the Scriptures to answer more questions about this terrible place. What is the purpose of Hell, how long will people be confined there, and where is it? Join us then as this compelling series continues.

Eternal Conscious Punishment

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Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment. - John 5:28-29

Last Sunday we began our new sermon series titled “Heaven and Hell”. As this name suggests, we are going to spend the next few months studying the Biblical teachings on these two places. There are many misconceptions in our culture today - some even within the Christian church - regarding both Heaven and Hell. The purpose of these messages is combat the false ideas that are being widely received by presenting the truth as it is written in Scripture.

In the first message of this series we examined several verses and passages in the Bible that portray what Hell is actually like. In the gospels Jesus described Hell as a place of unspeakable torment and suffering. He compared it to a blazing furnace of unquenchable fire that is completely shrouded by outer darkness. In this awful place, the sounds of weeping and gnashing of teeth ring through the air while the worm of death never dies. In short, the the Word of God describes Hell as a place of extreme physical, psychological, and emotional pain beyond our human understanding.

Such a frightening picture of Hell is extremely unsettling and uncomfortable. Many in our society refuse to accept the Biblical description and instead teach different views. In 2011 a prominent megachurch pastor named Rob Bell released a popular book titled Love Wins in which he questioned the traditional Biblical teachings about Hell. At its annual meeting later that year, the Southern Baptist Convention responded by passing a resolution confirming its doctrinal stance. The resolution, in part, emphasized the literal existence of Hell and described it as a place of “eternal conscious punishment”.

As we continue our study of Hell this morning, we will discuss this phrase “eternal conscious punishment” and look at the extensive Biblical support for it. In this message we will affirm our doctrinal beliefs regarding the longevity or duration of Hell and the purpose of Hell’s existence.

I. HOW LONG WILL WE BE CONDEMNED IN HELL?

“Now at that time Michael, the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people, will arise. And there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt.” - Daniel 12:1-2

“If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the eternal fire.” - Matthew 18:8

There are numerous verses that plainly state that Hell is eternal. The usage of the word eternal in these verses obviously refers to a duration of time. Those who are in Hell will be there forever without any hope of release or escape. To interpret the clear and repeated use of the word eternal in any other way is a real stretch. God’s judgment is everlasting, and those who have rebelled against Him and rejected the salvation He offers will be consigned to Hell forever. This has been the teaching of the church of centuries, but there are always those who refute it.

Some religious leaders falsely teach that those in Hell can still repent, be saved, and subsequently be transferred to Heaven. They suggest that there will be a second chance for the unregenerate after their physical death. Others believe that after some undisclosed period of time, the condemned will be annihilated and completely cease to exist. This view proposes that Hell will not be eternal but temporal. These two proposals, along with many others that deny or undermine the eternal nature of Hell, do not have any sound basis in Scripture.

When we think of the eternity of Hell we must also consider the finality of Hell. There will be nothing else to follow it. It will be the final and unending chapter for those who abide there. There will be no prospect of something new, something better, something else... Hell will be an eternal end. Those who have been convicted and imprisoned in Hell will serve an eternal sentence without any hope for parole.

II. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF HELL?

These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” - Matthew 25:46

just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, since they in the same way as these indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh, are exhibited as an example in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire. - Jude 1:7

The stated purpose of Hell is to punish those who have rejected God. In order to understand this, we must recognize the just nature of God. While we prefer to focus on His loving and merciful attributes, we must remember that the LORD is also vengeful and jealous. The Bible speaks bluntly about the retribution that God will exact upon His enemies. It warns people to fear Him because He has the power to cast them into Hell. Hell serves as the literal location where this divinely decreed punishment will take place.

In keeping with this purpose, those who are condemned to Hell will be conscious and fully aware of their suffering and punishment. In other words, they will actually feel and experience the pain and agony of Hell. Apart from such consciousness, how could it truly be a place of

punishment? If those in Hell were numb to its suffering or oblivious to its terrors how could it be a suitable consequence? Punishment implies consciousness.

There is a profound difference between discipline and punishment. When God disciplines someone, He does so as an act of redemption. The Bible teaches that God disciplines those He loves in order that they might learn from their mistakes. Discipline seeks to change future behavior and bring about eventual restoration. Punishment, however, does not. The purpose of punishment is to impose a penalty upon those who have committed an offense. It is not intended to teach anything, but rather to inflict retribution. While discipline is an act of love, punishment is a requirement of justice.

III. IS HELL A FAIR PUNISHMENT?

He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification. - Romans 4:25

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. - Galatians 2:20

Many people, both inside and outside of the church, believe that eternal punishment in Hell is totally unfair. They insist that such an awful fate is far too severe. Why should someone who only sinned for 70 or so years during their earthly lifetime have to suffer in Hell forever? The punishment doesn't seem to fit the crime... or does it?

Following this line of reasoning, eternal life in Heaven seems far too generous. Why should someone who only believed in God for 70 or so years during their earthly lifetime be rewarded with the blessings of Heaven forever? Isn't it funny how the same people who complain about the unfairness of an eternal Hell never apply this same principle to Heaven?

The punishment that is executed as the result of a crime is not measured based on the duration of the act, but rather upon the nature or severity of the act. For example, it may take only a few minutes to rob a bank or to kill someone. Would it then be reasonable to sentence the offender to only a few minutes in prison? Obviously not! In the same way, the punishment of Hell is not predicated upon how long someone rejected God but rather upon the unspeakably egregious fact that they did reject Him.

Suppose you murdered a highly prominent person. This would likely carry a life sentence right? But what if you were responsible for the death of an infinitely prominent Person? Those who reject the salvation offered through Christ's death on the cross are held responsible by God for His murder. Either you have been "crucified with Christ" or you are a "crucifier of Christ". Because Jesus is infinitely good, infinitely righteous, and infinitely perfect the just degree of

punishment imposed upon His killers should appropriately match His endless glory. Anything less than eternal punishment would not be sufficient or suitable in light of His magnificence.

CONCLUSION

In the opening sermons in this series, we have asked and answered these questions:

- What is Hell like? Hell can be compared to a furnace of unquenchable fire covered in abject darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth & their worm never dies.
- How long will the unsaved be in Hell? Those who abide in Hell will be there forever.
- What is the purpose of Hell? It serves as the place where those who've rejected God are punished.
- Will individuals be conscious in Hell? Yes, they will be fully aware of and experience firsthand the excruciating suffering that takes place there.
- Is Hell a fair punishment? Yes, those who renounce an infinitely good Savior deserve and infinitely bad punishment. Anything less would be unfair.

Next week we will consider these questions: "Where is Hell?" and "Who all will be in Hell?". I hope you will join us then.

Where Is and Who Will Be In Hell?

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[God] will render to each person according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. - Romans 2:6-8

This message is the third in our continuing sermon series titled “Heaven and Hell”. In this series we are studying the Biblical teachings on these two destinies. We started this collection of messages by examining the doctrine of Hell, and will resume that discussion today. Before we launch into this morning’s message, let take a moment to review what we’ve learned so far.

Hell is a literal place that Jesus spoke often about. There is approximately 3 times more content in the Bible about Hell than there is about Heaven.

Hell is described as a place of unquenchable fire, outer darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth, and the undying worm. It is a place of unimaginable suffering and torment.

Hell is a place of eternal conscious punishment. Infinite punishment is the only just sentence for those who’ve rejected an infinitely good and righteous Savior.

This morning we will resume our analysis of Hell and consider a few more pertinent questions. First of all, where is Hell? Does the Bible give us any indication? Secondly, who all will be in Hell? Will it just be unsaved people, or will there be others there? Let’s delve into the Scriptures and see what they say...

I. LOCATION

Therefore it says, “When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, and He gave gifts to men.” (Now this expression, “He ascended,” what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things.) - Ephesians 4:8-10

And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will be brought down to Hades! - Luke 10:15

Many people believe that Hell is located at below the ground, at the center of the earth. The Bible describes Hell as a bottomless pit or abyss. It is called the “lower parts of the earth”, a place where Jesus “descended” for a brief time following the crucifixion. To descend means to go down, which again seems to indicate that Hell is below the ground. The fire and brimstone of

Hell would be consistent with this theory, seeing that the center of the earth is made up of molten rock heated to over 12,000 degrees Fahrenheit.

Further perpetuating this belief, numerous reports have been made over the years from those who study and/or have visited volcanoes. There are several documented instances of people hearing what sounded like screaming and wailing coming forth from the mouths of volcanoes. Could it be that these were the cries of people suffering in Hell below? I suppose that it's possible...

While this is one proposal for the location of Hell, there are others. Some suggest that it is a black hole, somewhere in distant space, where no light can escape. This would fit the description of "outer darkness" that we discussed earlier in this series. Some say that the earth itself, after being destroyed with fire, will become the final location of Hell. These theories are all merely speculation. The Bible does not definitively tell us where Hell is, but wherever it is we sure don't want to be there!

II. OCCUPANTS

"Then He will also say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; - Matthew 25:41

And the beast was seized, and with him the false prophet who performed the signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image; these two were thrown alive into the lake of fire which burns with brimstone. - Revelation 19:20

He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. - John 3:18

Hell was originally created as a place in which to confine and punish the devil and his angels. The torments of Hell were intended particularly for them. It is important to realize that Satan and his demons will suffer there under the judgment of God. The Devil will not be the ruler in Hell, or have any dominion there at all. He will not be exempt from its misery. He will endure the eternal wrath and fury of the LORD's divine justice along with everyone else.

In addition to Satan and the fallen angels, the Bible states that the beast and false prophet will also be consigned to Hell. In the last days, during a period known as the Tribulation, the Antichrist will rise to worldwide prominence and lead many astray. His counterpart, the False Prophet, will assist him in this mass deception. During this time, God will send forth severe judgment upon the earth. At the conclusion of the Tribulation, Jesus will return and the beast (the Antichrist) and the false prophet will be thrown into Hell.

Although Hell was intended for the Devil and his angels, unfortunately there will be millions of unsaved people there too. Those who have not accepted Jesus and received forgiveness for their sins will also be condemned to Hell. The sin of unbelievers separates them from God and necessitates His righteous judgment. Though it is not God's desire for any person to end up in Hell, the sad reality is that many will. Thus, Hell will be occupied by the Devil, the Antichrist, the False Prophet, all of the demons, and all unsaved people.

III. SEPARATION

dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, - 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9

he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. - Revelation 14:10

Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there. - Psalm 139:7-8

Hell is a place where sinners are imprisoned "away from the presence of the Lord". They are separated from the glory of God. Yet, one of the divine characteristics of the LORD is His omnipresence. The Bible teaches that God is present everywhere and that there is no place where one can flee from Him. The Bible teaches that even those in Hell will be tormented in the presence of the Lamb and the holy angels. So which is it? How can those in Hell be both separated from God's presence and in His presence at the same time?

In the original manuscripts, two different Greek words are used in the verses cited above that both translate "presence". One of these directly refers to physical spatial proximity. The other concerns a person's face or outward appearance. The expression shown on a person's face is generally a reflection of what they are thinking or how they are acting. For example, if someone was extremely happy there would likely be a smile "present" on their face.

When understood in this fashion, there is no contradiction in Scripture. The LORD is spatially present in Hell, but His abundant goodness and mercy are not present in His expression to those held there. In other words, Hell is a place where the favor of God is totally absent. Those confined in Hell are completely separated from God's lovingkindness and fellowship, but are fully acquainted with His wrath and justice. In this way, those in Hell experience separation from God's grace while simultaneously suffering in His presence.

CONCLUSION

God's Word does not definitively say where Hell is, but it does clearly list those who will go there. Fortunately, if you have accepted Jesus as your Lord and personal Savior you have nothing to fear. Those who have repented of their sins, surrendered their life to the Lord, and received the forgiveness He offers will be saved. This is the simple, yet powerful truth of the gospel.

Wherever Hell is, I know that I'm not going there because I've been born again. I have confidence that God's grace is sufficient for me, and this gives me cause for great joy. That said, I suspect that many people I know are going to Hell. This fact makes me incredibly sad. But the question is, what will I do about it? Will I sound the alarm and warn my lost family and friends of the looming judgment? What about you?

Degrees of Punishment

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Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. - 1 Corinthians 6:9-10

Around 1300 AD, an Italian poet named Dante Alighieri composed his most famous work “The Divine Comedy”. In this epic story, Dante describes his fictional journey to Heaven. The poem is regarded as a classic piece of world literature. The story is divided into 3 parts that tell of his adventures from Hell on to Paradise. The most widely read portion of his trilogy is the first part which is called “Inferno”. This focuses on Dante’s travels through Hell.

In his poem, Dante imagines hell in the center of the earth and divided into 9 concentric circles or spheres. Each of these are set aside for particular types of sinners, and each has a different type of punishment. As Dante journeys through each circle starting at the outermost ring and moving toward the center, he describes sufferings that become more and more intense and severe. Dante finds Satan in the last circle at the core of the earth, in the deepest hell, which has been reserved for the most awful of sinners.

Though Dante’s work is one of fiction and is not based squarely on Scripture, and though it is a comedy and not intended to be taken seriously, “The Inferno” does present an interesting idea. The thought that there are different levels of Hell or varying degrees of punishment for sinners based upon the particular nature of their sins is somewhat intriguing. But is there actual Biblical support for the widespread acceptance of this belief, or is simply derived from fictional works and fanciful imaginations such as those of Dante?

In today’s message, the fourth in our series on “Heaven and Hell”, we will investigate the premise that there are different degrees of punishment in Hell. We will see what the Bible says about this notion. As such, I’ve titled this message “Degrees of Punishment?”. Let’s begin...

I. GREATER SIN

Jesus answered, “You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above; for this reason he who delivered Me to you has the greater sin. - John 19:11

And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. - Revelation 20:12

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. - James 2:10

Obviously there are many different types of sin. The Old Testament law lists many of these and assigns various types of sacrifices to atone for each. The diverse punishments for these transgressions further indicates that some sins are more severe or consequential than others. For example, a child shoplifting a piece of bubblegum would not rise to the same level as a criminal violently murdering someone. In other words, some sins appear to be greater than others. As such, it seems reasonable that their punishment would change accordingly.

While speaking to Pilate just prior to His crucifixion, Jesus stated that Judas Iscariot had committed a “greater sin” by betraying Him then Pilate had committed by condemning Him. With these words, the Lord compared the sins of these two men and concluded that one was more significant than the other. In another passage, John describes the judgment of the dead as being rendered “according to their deeds”. In keeping with Jesus’ statement to Pilate, surely some of these sinners have committed more serious offenses than others.

Though the Bible acknowledges that some sins are greater than others - particularly in terms of their temporal effects - it also teaches that all sin leads to separation from God. Those who are guilty of only one sin, as small as it might be, are considered to be spiritually guilty of all. This means that all unrepentant sinners, no matter how heinous or vile, stand guilty before our holy God and are thereby condemned to Hell.

Since all levels of unforgiven sin result in the same judgment, yet some sins are considered greater than others, the possibility that there are different degrees of punishment in this equitable judgment seems reasonable. While all unsaved sinners who die apart from Christ go to Hell, could it be that some receive harsher punishment than others?

II. GREATER TOLERANCE

Truly I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city. - Matthew 10:15

And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. Nevertheless I say to you that it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you.” - Matthew 11:23-24

“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had been performed in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the judgment than for you. - Luke 10:13-14

As Jesus travelled about preaching and teaching about the kingdom of God, some cities received the gospel message more readily than others. In certain places where He was welcomed and treated hospitably, Jesus performed many miracles and wonders. But in other locations, He was outright rejected and shunned. Citing the contrast between His reception in these differing towns, the Lord declared that the punishment for some would be “more tolerable” than others.

When Jesus sent the apostles out to proclaim the gospel throughout Israel, he told them to depart from any place that did not receive them or heed their words. If shunned, the apostles were instructed to “shake the dust off of their feet” and move right along to the next location. Jesus further stated that it would be “more tolerable” for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than those cities who’d rejected them.

Jesus’ repeated declaration that some punishments would be “more tolerable” than others seems to suggest that there could be varying degrees of suffering in Hell. As we have already learned in this series, Hell is described as an unimaginably terrible place for all who are there, but could it be even worse for some than others?

III. GREATER PUNISHMENT

In His teaching He was saying: “Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes, and like respectful greetings in the market places, and chief seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets, who devour widows’ houses, and for appearance’s sake offer long prayers; these will receive greater condemnation.” - Mark 12:38-40

“Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love respectful greetings in the market places, and chief seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets, who devour widows’ houses, and for appearance’s sake offer long prayers. These will receive greater condemnation.” - Luke 20:46-47

And that slave who knew his master’s will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, will receive many lashes, but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more. - Luke 12:47-48

In both Mark and Luke we read of an occasion when Jesus described the pious behavior of the scribes. He cited their hypocrisy and self-righteousness, declaring that their religious behavior was often practiced for appearance’s sake only. He warned His followers not to be like these men, and went on to say that these scribes would receive “greater condemnation”. This leads me to wonder - greater than who?

Jesus told a parable of servants who were responsible for keeping the master’s house in order while he was away. He stated that if the master returned and found his servants not doing as

they'd been instructed, they would receive a harsh punishment of "many lashes". Then He added that if there were servants who were uninformed of the master's wishes, they would receive a lesser punishment of "flogging". While both were punished, this parable distinguishes a greater punishment for some than others.

Yet again the implication is that some sins carry a more severe punishment. While all sin leads to judgment and condemnation, the Bible seems to hint at that belief that there are varying degrees of punishment in Hell.

CONCLUSION

Jesus stated that some sins are greater than others. He repeatedly said that it would be more tolerable in the day of judgment for some cities than others. He also stressed that the scribes would suffer greater condemnation for practicing a self serving religion than others would. In each of these instances, the Lord suggested that there are indeed different levels in or at least various degrees of punishment in Hell. That said, the Bible never explicitly says this or offers any explanation of how these differences are manifested from one another. If there are degrees of punishment in Hell, we are not told how they are divided or applied to those imprisoned there.

I am always hesitant to mention the possibility of differing degrees of punishment in Hell for fear that someone might think that parts of it would be pleasant and perhaps even desirable. If there are increasing degrees of punishment in Hell, and I believe there may be, even the fairest or least severe of these is still horrific. As such, we need not get hung up on this. All of Hell is "eternal conscious punishment" where the damned will experience the terrible wrath of God. It is a place where even the most decent unsaved sinner will suffer tremendously and without end.

Next week we will conclude the first half of this series and our discussion of Hell. We will talk about the three different hells that are described in Scripture. After that, we will turn our attention to Heaven as we continue through the remaining sermons of this series.

The Three Different Hells

Originally Preached 2/12/2017

But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.” - Revelation 21:8

Good morning. Today’s message is the fifth in our series “Heaven and Hell”. This will be the last sermon on Hell. Before we get started, let’s briefly review what we’ve learned so far...

What is Hell Like? It is a place of unquenchable fire, of outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, and their worm never dies...

What is the duration and purpose of Hell? It is a place of eternal conscious punishment reserved for the enemies of God...

Where is Hell? The exact location of Hell is unknown but the most prominent theory is that it is below the ground at the earth’s center...

Who all will be in Hell? Hell will be populated by the Devil, the Antichrist, the False Prophet, all fallen angels (demons), and all unsaved people...

Are there degrees of punishment for those in Hell? The Bible is not definitive on this issue, but it does contain hints that suggest this possibility...

The topic today deals with the four different proper names that are translated as Hell in the Scriptures - one in the Old Testament and three in the New. Do these names refer to separate places or all they all names for the exact same place? How are we to understand the nature of Hell in light of its changing and varied titles or descriptions?

I. SHEOL

So Jacob tore his clothes, and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. Then all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. And he said, “Surely I will go down to Sheol in mourning for my son.” So his father wept for him.
- Genesis 37:34-35

“Oh that You would hide me in Sheol, That You would conceal me until Your wrath returns to You, That You would set a limit for me and remember me! - Job 14:13

The wicked will return to Sheol, Even all the nations who forget God. - Psalm 9:17

Sheol is the Hebrew word that is used throughout the Old Testament to describe the abode of the dead. On a few occasions the word is translated in our English bibles as “hell” but most often it is translated more generally as “the grave”. Jacob, Job, and several other patriarchs who were faithful followers of God spoke of going to Sheol following their death. At the same time, King David declared that the wicked would be condemned to Sheol as well. In light of this, defining Sheol as “the grave” seems more appropriate in that both the righteous and the unrighteous are present there.

II. HADES

I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. - Matthew 16:18

...the rich man also died and was buried. In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, - Luke 16:22b-23a

Hades is the Greek word used in the New Testament in place of the older Hebrew term Sheol. The fact that these words are substituted for one another reveals their close relationship. Unlike the more inclusive term Sheol, the word Hades is always translated as Hell and applies exclusively to those who die apart from Christ. Therefore, the meaning of Hades is not as broad or expansive as that of Sheol. By reconciling the usage of these two words, it is reasonable to conclude that Hades is a part of Sheol. Since Sheol includes both the righteous and unrighteous, it appears that Hades is that portion of Sheol that contains only the unrighteous.

I believe that this arrangement is described clearly by Jesus in His story about the rich man and Lazarus. In this passage, the Lord tells about two men who died - one who was saved and the other who was lost. Both of these deceased men went to Sheol, or the grave. However, the wicked man was sent to Hades or Hell where he suffered in torment, while the redeemed man went to Abraham’s Bosom where he was comforted (more on this later in the series). These two men, while both in Sheol, were separated by an expansive gulf that divided the two sides.

III. TARTARUS

For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; - 2 Peter 2:4

And angels who did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode, He has kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day, - Jude 1:6

Tartarus is another Greek word that is translated as Hell. It is used only once in the Bible in Peter’s second letter and it refers specifically to sinful or fallen angels. Tartarus is a hell that is reserved exclusively for angels that have rebelled against God, and thus it is not populated by humans. Not all fallen angels are currently confined in Tartarus - there are an untold number of

demons that daily victimize and badger people on earth. But it appears that some fallen angels have already been consigned to Tartarus. Some Bible scholars propose that those sinful angels who engaged in physical relationships with human women as mentioned in Genesis 6:1-4 were the ones cast into Tartarus. It has been further theorized that Tartarus is a distinct area or the lowest pit of Hades.

IV. GEHENNA

But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. - Matthew 5:22

But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him! - Luke 12:5

Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. - Revelation 20:14-15

Gehenna is yet another Greek word, most often spoken by Jesus in the gospels, that is translated as Hell. It is derived from "The Valley of Hinnom" which was located just outside of Jerusalem where some of Israel's ancient kings practiced child sacrifice. Due to its notorious past, this place was considered cursed and was renamed by God "The Valley of Slaughter". By the time of Jesus, this valley was used as a garbage pit where refuse, waste, and even the unwanted dead were cast in order to be incinerated. Fire burned there continually in order to consume the debris. Jesus often used the word gehenna as a apt name for Hell due to the obvious similarity.

The word Gehenna is frequently used with adjectives describing fire or flames. As such, many Bible students believe that Gehenna is the proper name of "the lake of fire" which is mentioned in the book of Revelation. The fires of Gehenna seem to be a good match with the lake of burning sulphur and brimstone found in the closing chapters of the Bible. Based upon my own personal study, I am prone to agree with this identification.

CONCLUSION

In the end, I offer a final analysis as shown on the diagram at the end of this book. This viewpoint is a widely accepted explanation that neatly reconciles all three of the proper names for Hell - Hades, Tartarus, and Gehenna. This process is specific and limited to only the unsaved - those who die without a saving knowledge of God. There is some variation of this process for the righteous, which we will discuss later in this series when we talk about Heaven...

Following their physical death, the lost are cast into Sheol (the grave) immediately and are confined in that part of Sheol called Hades which is reserved solely for the unrighteous. Therefore, Hades is the present Hell and is currently being populated.

Tartarus is Hell (or a part of Hell) that was exclusively dedicated for a certain group of fallen angels that committed grave sin and were imprisoned by God some time ago. Thus, it is currently populated but is not being added to.

After the coming millennial reign of Christ at the Great White Throne Judgement, God will throw all of those who are held in Hades (along with the Devil, his demons, and probably all of Tartarus) into the lake of fire which is Gehenna. Hence, Gehenna is the future and eternal Hell which is currently empty but will soon be occupied.

Congratulations! We have made it through the first half of this sermon series. Starting next Sunday we will turn our attention to Heaven and spend the next several weeks discovering what the Bible says about it. Until then, may the Lord bless you!

The Three Different Heavens

Originally Preached 2/19/2017

“Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also. - John 14:1-3

Over the past five weeks we have explored some of the major Biblical teachings on Hell. It is my hope that you have gained a more accurate, clear understanding of the doctrine of Hell. Many of the ideas floating around in our world today are unscriptural and/or outright false, and therefore it is important for Christians to know what the Bible actually says about both Heaven and Hell.

We will now turn our attention to Heaven. Over the next month and a half we will examine the Scriptures to find out what they reveal about this amazing place. Though there is much less content in the Bible about the particulars of Heaven than there is about Hell, still much can be learned about it. I am looking forward to preaching on the glories of Heaven for a while... the prolonged teaching on Hell was a real downer!

Let us first establish that Heaven is a literal place. It is not some figurative or symbolic destination that doesn’t actually exist. On the contrary, Jesus told His disciples that, following His death, He would be going to Heaven where He’d make preparations for their arrival later on. He described it as His Father’s house - a place where there were many mansions or dwelling places for them to live as well. This is the clear and oft repeated teaching of Scripture - Heaven is a real, genuine location.

In the coming messages, we will seek to answer many of the same questions that we asked during our sermons on Hell. However, we will address them in a different order. In my opinion, the doctrine of Heaven is a bit more complex to present. Before we can answer basic questions such as “What is Heaven Like?” or “Where Is Heaven?” we must point out that there are different forms or manifestations of Heaven spoken about in the Bible. Each of these has unique variations that we will need to discuss.

Therefore, we will begin our study of Heaven by dealing with the three different “heavens” that are found in Scripture. Understanding and distinguishing them at the outset will help clarify and direct the additional messages that are to follow.

I. THE NATURAL HEAVENS

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven. - 2 Corinthians 12:2

Then God said, "Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the heavens." - Genesis 1:20

God made the two great lights, the greater light to govern the day, and the lesser light to govern the night; He made the stars also. God placed them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, - Genesis 1:16-17

In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, he tells of a man that was caught up to the "third heaven". This expression has led to confusion in some cases, but can easily be explained. The word heaven has multiple meanings that do not always refer to the afterlife. We read in the story of creation that God created the birds and allowed them to fly throughout the expanse of heaven. He also created the sun, moon, and stars and placed them in the heavens to give light to the earth. Thus we can understand Paul's statement in this way: the first heaven is the sky or atmosphere, the second heaven is outer space, and the third heaven is the dwelling place of God. When we read the Bible, we must remember that the word heaven is sometimes used to refer to the natural heavens of this universe - the sky and space.

II. THE PAST HEAVEN

Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. - Luke 16:22

Therefore it says, "When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, And He gave gifts to men." (Now this expression, "He ascended," what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? - Ephesians 4:8-9

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, - 1 Peter 3:18-19

Jesus told the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus prior to His crucifixion. He spoke of a poor but godly man named Lazarus who was carried away to a place called Abraham's Bosom. As we mentioned in last week's sermon, Abraham's Bosom is that half of Sheol (the grave) set aside for the righteous while Hades is reserved for the unrighteous. Peter wrote that following Jesus' death He visited those who were in prison, which can be understood to mean in Sheol. Paul further explained that when Jesus ascended to Heaven sometime following His crucifixion he led a host of captives there with Him.

There are many interpretations of these and other related verses, but I believe the following to be most reasonable. Abraham's Bosom is the past heaven, where are of the Old Testament saints who were faithful followers of God went when they died. After Jesus' crucifixion, the Lord descended into Sheol where He spoke to and subsequently freed the righteous who were there.

At some point soon thereafter, He led them to the present Heaven (Himself being the firstfruits) where they all now reside together. Thus, the place called Abraham's Bosom is now vacant.

III. THE PRESENT HEAVEN

we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. - 2 Corinthians 5:8

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better - Philippians 1:21-23

Paul - who lived a wrote after the earthly ministry of Jesus - made it clear that when a saved person dies, they immediately are ushered into the presence of the Lord. On more than one occasion, He personally reflected upon the wonderful thought of being with Jesus in Heaven. The present Heaven is where our Savior currently seats at the right hand of God, waiting for His triumphant return to the earth. It is a spiritual kingdom where the souls of the saved go immediately after they die. It is the place that we refer to and think about as Heaven today. Though it is not our final home, the present Heaven is a much more desirable and better place than this fallen world.

IV. THE FUTURE HEAVEN

But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. - 2 Peter 3:13

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, - Revelation 21:1-3

In the final chapters of the Bible, the apostle John describes a New Heaven and a New Earth. In his vision, he sees the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of the present Heaven to this New Earth. He explains that God Himself will come to dwell in this restored or recreated earth among His people. All of these events follow the millennial reign of Christ during which the Lord already established His kingdom on earth (see Revelation 20:1-6). Ultimately, the Bible describes a future Heaven on renewed earth where the redeemed will live in the presence of God forever.

CONCLUSION

As we progress through the remainder of our sermons on Heaven, we will deal primarily with the present and future heavens. Because we live after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension the past heaven, or Abraham's Bosom, no longer has any meaningful application to our lives. But the present Heaven - the place where believers now go as soon as they die - and the future Heaven - where all believers will ultimately end up - are both very relevant to Christians today. It is important for us to have a good understanding of both.

The great singer and songwriter Jim Reeves once wrote "This world is not my home, I'm just a passing through". While I love the sentiment and the hope it conveys, this lyric is not completely true. Yes, this fallen world as it currently exists under the curse is not our home, but one day the restored earth that has been freed from the curse will be. What a marvelous thought!

Next week we will begin talking about what Heaven is like. How does the Bible describe the present and future heavens? How are they the same and how are they different? What are some of the characteristics of Heaven that we as believers can look forward to?

The Present Heaven

Originally Preached 2/26/2017

But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. - 2 Peter 3:7

Last Sunday we began the second half of our sermon series on “Heaven and Hell” by identifying the three different heavens that are presented in Scripture. The first of these was called Abraham’s Bosom, and was the designated area in Sheol where the Old Testament saints went following their earthly death. After His crucifixion Jesus briefly visited this place and liberated those righteous souls who had been waiting there - people such as Noah, Jacob, and David. He led them to the present heaven, thereby leaving Abraham’s bosom (the past heaven) vacant.

The second heaven discussed in the Bible is the one we think of today. It is the present heaven. All believers who have died since the resurrection and ascension of Christ around 2,000 years ago have gone immediately to be with the Lord in the present heaven. This will continue to be the destination for the souls of deceased Christians until the establishment of the future heaven following the millennial reign of Jesus. If you have been born again and were to die today, you would go to the present heaven.

The third heaven in the Bible is described in detail in the final two chapters of Revelation, though it is also mentioned elsewhere in other books. It is called the New Heavens and New Earth, and is the future and final heaven where all of God’s children will dwell with Him forever. Many Christians do not make a clear distinction between the future and present and heaven, which leads to a basic misunderstanding of the theology of heaven.

This morning we are going to learn some basic truths found in the Bible relating to the present heaven. What is it like? Where is it? What will the people there be like and what will they do?

I. WITH ME IN PARADISE

And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows— was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak. - 2 Corinthians 12:3-4

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.’ - Revelation 2:7

The Word of God does not provide us with many details about the physical characteristics of the present heaven. This has led to much speculation and imagination. Some have pictured it as an open expanse in the blue skies above, where the redeemed endlessly strum upon harps and sing praises to God. This flawed view has actually led some to believe that Heaven will be

extremely boring and monotonous. Sadly, there are Christians who dread going to Heaven because of these unbiblical and distorted descriptions. They couldn't be farther from the truth!

On the cross, Jesus described Heaven as Paradise. Though He might have been referring to the past heaven in that particular instance, elsewhere the Bible clearly uses the word paradise as a synonym for the present heaven. The word paradise in the Greek is paradeiso which means "park". While our understanding of a park has changed over time, in those days it was basically a garden. A park or garden is a peaceful place where people go to find solace, comfort, joy, and beauty. Scripture even states that the tree of life is there. Perhaps we should begin thinking about the present heaven in this way - as a garden park, seeing that its how Jesus described it.

II. THE THRONE ROOM

So then, when the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. - Mark 16:19

Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne was standing in heaven, and One sitting on the throne. - Revelation 4:2

Forty days after His resurrection, Jesus ascended into the present heaven where He sat down at the right hand of God. During the apostle John's revelation, he saw a throne in the present heaven where God the Father was seated and various creatures/angels worshiped Him. Stephen the martyr, in the moments before his death, looked up into Heaven and saw Jesus standing at God's right hand. These passages indicate that God currently dwells in the present heaven with Jesus present beside Him, both enthroned on high. The throne room of God is certainly one of the greatest features of the present heaven.

III. IN THE CLOUDS

And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. They also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven. - Acts 1:9-11

Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. - 1 Thessalonians 4:17

The disciples stood watching as Jesus ascended up into Heaven. They saw Him being lifted up into the clouds eventually disappearing from their sight. The angels promised that when He returned, Jesus would come back in the same way. During the rapture, we are told that Jesus will appear in the clouds and call His children to meet Him in the air. These verses, and many

others, seem to suggest that the present heaven is somewhere in the sky, perhaps in distant space. Regardless of its locality, God is omnipresent and is always near to us. Though the Bible does not give the exact coordinates, there is an obvious and intentional contrast made between Hell down below and Heaven up above.

IV. BODIES AND SOULS

Remember Him before the silver cord is broken and the golden bowl is crushed, the pitcher by the well is shattered and the wheel at the cistern is crushed; then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it. - Ecclesiastes 12:6-7

And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. - Matthew 17:2-3

Around the throne were twenty-four thrones; and upon the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white garments, and golden crowns on their heads. - Revelation 4:4

One of the major distinctions between the present heaven and the future heaven is the nature of our physical bodies. The Bible teaches that, when a person dies here on earth, their body is laid in the grave but their spirit immediately goes to be with the Lord in Heaven. At some point during the last days (perhaps at the rapture of the Church), the bodies of these believers will be resurrected and reunited with their spirits. These will be glorified bodies. From that time forward, God's children will dwell with Him both in body and spirit. In the meantime however, do the righteous have bodies in the present heaven or are they only disembodied spirits?

First, let us remember that Jesus rose physically from the grave and ascended into Heaven bodily. If Jesus already has a body in the present heaven, perhaps we will too. During the transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus in bodily form and were recognizable to the apostles. In his apocalyptic vision, John saw men (elders) wearing clothing and crowns seated in the throne room around God. These and other passages seem to suggest that, though they might not yet be the final resurrected and glorified bodies, the righteous seem to have temporary bodies or some physical form that allows them to maintain their identity and to function as a person in the present heaven.

V. WATCHING AND WAITING

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, - Hebrews 12:1

When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained;

and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also. - Revelation 6:9-11

Those who are in the present heaven are described as witnesses who seem to be very aware of what is happening on the earth. They are not just casually interested, but instead appear to be very concerned about the affairs of those still living. It is as if they are cheering us on from their vantage point on high. In Revelation (before the second coming), the martyrs who have been killed for the cause of Christ during the Tribulation plead with the Lord to exact vengeance on their murderers. They seem to be growing impatient, which indicates that they are sensitive to time. The occupants of the present heaven may not literally be looking down on us, but they are apparently aware of our affairs and eager for Jesus' return.

There are a few other observations that can be made from these Tribulation martyrs. First, they remember who they were on earth and how they died. This suggests that they had retained memories from their previous life. They were still the same people as they had been, only now they were in Heaven. Second, they ask God a question and receive an answer. This reveals that they did not know everything, and were able to gain new information. In other words, they were able to learn.

CONCLUSION

While there is much we don't know about the present heaven, the Bible does give us a few wonderful details. These are enough to whet our appetites and feed our imaginations. Here is a brief summation of today's message.

The present heaven is an intermediate state where believers go between the time of their physical death and the appearance of the New Heavens and New Earth. It is a heavenly paradise, filled with indescribable beauty. The throne room of God is located there, where Jesus Himself currently sits at the right hand of the Father. The redeemed in this glorious place enjoy comfort, peace, and rest. Each seems to have a functional, individual body though it isn't their final resurrected and glorified body. In addition, people in the present heaven have the same identities that they had while on earth and even remember the details of their former lives. They appear to be watching and quite concerned about those who are still living down below. Wow!

Next week we will discover what Scripture says about the future heaven. Until then, may God bless you!

The Future Heaven

Originally Preached 3/5/2017

But as it is, they [Abraham and his descendants] desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them. - Hebrews 11:16

If you were planning to move to a new and exciting city where you intended to live for many years, I suspect you'd want to find out as much as possible about that place before you got there. Gaining some advanced knowledge would not only help satisfy your curiosity, but would also likely increase your desire to go - particularly if the place that you were currently living was a mess. Well, guess what? If you are a born again Christian then you will soon be moving to a glorious new home called Heaven - far nicer than this old fallen world. Don't you want to know what it will be like? By carefully studying God's Word, we can begin to acquaint ourselves with this glorious place that awaits us in the life to come.

In our previous sermon, we explored a few characteristics of the current heaven. While many people falsely envision an vast expanse of bright blue sky where the spirits of the redeemed float around blissfully worshipping God, what we actually discovered in the Bible depicts Heaven as a garden paradise. The throne room of God is there, where both the Father and Son are seated. Those believers who go there clearly have some form of a functional human body though it is not their final resurrected and glorified body. Interestingly, the occupants of the present heaven are portrayed as "witnesses" who are carefully watching and concerned about the events unfolding down here on the earth. In addition, they are the same people (have the same identities) in the present Heaven as they did on earth, and even retain memories of their former life.

In today's message we will turn our attention to the future heaven. In the final two chapters of the Bible, Revelation 21 & 22, the apostle John describes what he calls the New Heaven and New Earth. The present heaven, which we discussed last week, descends from the sky to this earth and gives way to the future heaven. The creation of God is restored to its original pristine condition, beautiful and unscarred by sin or the curse. It will be here - in the New Heavens and on the New Earth - that the children of God will spend eternity with the LORD.

I. WHAT DOES NEW MEAN?

"For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things will not be remembered or come to mind. - Isaiah 65:17

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. - Revelation 21:1

“And He who sits on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” - Revelation 21:5a

There is debate among Bible believers as to whether God intends to destroy the current earth and make a brand new one, or restore the current earth into a new and possibly better one. This is an important distinction in that it speaks to the nature of God. Is He more inclined to discard that which has become tainted by sin, or is He more likely to reclaim and renew it? I believe that because our God is in the redemption business, He will salvage the earth and remake it.

Notice that God says, “I am making all things new.” The order of these words matter. There is a big difference between making “all new things” and making “all things new”. “New things” are those that have never existed before - such as the original creation of the heavens and earth described in Genesis 1. “Things new” refers to taking existing things and renewing them or restoring them to their original condition. God is the Master Restorer. He takes great delight in making the old, broken, and corrupted new again.

II. THE NEW JERUSALEM

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them,” - Revelation 21:2-3

And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God - Revelation 21:10

One of the most prominent features of the New Heavens and New Earth will be the New Jerusalem. This holy city is pictured as a bride that has been adorned for her husband - ie, the Lord Jesus Christ. Its beauty is beyond our imagination, yet John does his best to describe it. The city is made of pure gold - clear as glass, with walls of jasper, and a foundation of precious stones. Twelve pearly gates lead into the city, where its inhabitants walk on streets of gold. We often mistake these to be features of the present heaven, but the Bible clearly lists them as attributes of the New Jerusalem.

The measurements for this heavenly city are also provided. It is perfect cube 1,400 miles wide, long, and high. If it were placed in the United States, the city’s base would extend roughly from the Canadian to the Mexican border, and from the Pacific coastline to the Appalachian Mountains. If pictured like a skyscraper, it would rise high enough to contain over 600,000 stories or floors. It could easily hold billions of people, with ample space for all. If these are literal measurements, and there is no reason to think otherwise, what a colossal city this is going to be!

III. UNENDING LIGHT

And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. In the daytime (for there will be no night there) its gates will never be closed; - Revelation 21:23-25

And there will no longer be any night; and they will not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God will illumine them; and they will reign forever and ever. - Revelation 22:5

One of the stark contrasts between Heaven and Hell deals with light. If you recall from earlier in this series, one of the descriptors of Hell was “outer darkness”. Conversely, now we see that Heaven is a place of unending light. What is most amazing is the source of this light - it doesn’t come from the sun, moon, or stars. Instead, the New Heavens and New Earth are illuminated by the glory of God. There is no night, which suggests that those living there will have no need of sleep. If you think back to the original 6 days of creation, there was light on days 1-3 before the sun, moon, and stars were finally created on day 4. God was the light, is the light, and will be the light again!

IV. THE RIVER AND TREE OF LIFE

Then he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb, in the middle of its street. On either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. - Revelation 22:1-2

Then He said to me, “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost.” - Revelation 21:6

Notice that the throne room of God and the Lamb, that had previously been located in the present heaven, has now come to the New Heavens and New Earth. Flowing out from the throne is the river of life. It is significant that source of this life giving water is God Himself. On both sides of the river is the tree of life. Some scholars suggest that this singular “tree” is best understood as many of the same type of tree which line the shores on both sides. While there was only one tree of life in the Garden of Eden for Adam and Eve, it is reasonable that in the future heaven there would be many such trees which all bear fruit and produce leaves for the multitudes who live there. So there may be one tree or many...

IV. A PLACE OF NO MORE

“But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem for rejoicing and her people for gladness. “I will also rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in My people; and there will no longer be heard in her the voice of weeping and the sound of crying. - Isaiah 65:18-19

“and He [God] will wipe away every tear from their [the redeemed] eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.” - Revelation 21:4

One of the most frequently repeated verses about Heaven teaches us that it is a place of “no mores” - no more tears, no more death, no more mourning, no more crying, and no more pain. How is this possible? Because there is no longer any sin and the devastating curse has been forever lifted. Again we are presented with the vast disparity between Heaven and Hell. Hell is described as a place of torment where there is continual weeping and gnashing of teeth, while Heaven is a place of rejoicing and gladness where there is no crying, suffering, or pain. It is a place of endless comfort and joy.

CONCLUSION

This future heaven will come into being after the millennium and final judgment. It will be the culmination of God’s redemptive plan - the final act given in Scripture. God will finally rescue and restore His creation, resettling His beloved children in the place that He’d originally made exclusively for them. Before God created man and women, He carefully and meticulously constructed a perfect habitation for them. This place - the natural universe and earth - was designed expressly for humanity to be our most suitable home. That said, it makes perfect sense that our ideal place is and always will be on earth - and our Heaven should be and will be here.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. - Romans 8:18-22

The fate of the world is inseparably tied to that of man. It was our sin that brought disaster upon the earth and it is our redemption that will ultimately lead to the salvation of the earth. Until then, all of creation longs for its release from the slavery of corruption. This will someday take place when God “makes all things new”. The New Heaven and New Earth that is to come will be the final and future heaven - our eternal home!

Ten Common Questions

Originally Preached 3/12/2017

Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory. - Colossians 3:1-4

Today's message will be the ninth in our current series titled "Heaven and Hell". Since turning our attention to Heaven a few weeks ago, we have learned several details regarding the past, present, and future heavens. Though all three of these heavenly places were/are/will be much more wonderful and pleasant than this fallen world, each has its own unique distinctions. Still we can refer to them collectively by a single name - Heaven.

In most conversations about Heaven there are some common questions that are typically asked. These questions address particular concerns that are of great concern to most people. The Bible provides definitive answers for some of these, is completely silent on others, and gives limited information on the rest that allows for educated speculation.

This morning we are going to ask and answer ten common questions about Heaven. I suspect you have more than just ten questions, but our time together is limited. If you have a question or questions about Heaven (or Hell) that are not covered in today's sermon feel free to ask me later in person, by text, or by email. I will do my best to provide you with a Biblically supported answer. But for now, let's deal with these ten. Here we go!

I. WILL PEOPLE HAVE BODIES IN HEAVEN?

"As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will take His stand on the earth. Even after my skin is destroyed, yet from my flesh I shall see God;" - Job 19:25-26

So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power - 1 Corinthians 15:41-42

I find it quite amazing that Job confidently believed that he would someday see God in his flesh. Bible experts disagree on the exact dates of Job's life, but almost all place him well before Moses. This means that Job, a patriarch who preceded the law by many years, even at this early date was already theologically confident that he would stand before God bodily. Incredible!

This rudimentary belief is refined in the New Testament teaching of Paul and others. The Bible teaches in multiple places that the body of each believer will someday be resurrected from the grave, be transformed into an imperishable and incorruptible body, and then be reunited with

the spirit of the believer in a process called glorification. Thus, all Christians will ultimately abide with God in Heaven bodily - in the flesh - just as Job stated.

II. WILL PEOPLE BE RECOGNIZABLE IN HEAVEN?

Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means, Teacher). - John 20:16

On the morning Jesus rose from the grave - while in His resurrection body - Mary recognized Him. In the days that followed, many others saw and recognized the resurrected Lord. During the transfiguration, the apostles recognized Moses and Elijah. When King Saul had the spirit of Samuel raised up during a seance, he was recognizable. Following the death of his infant son, King David stated that he would someday see his son again. All of these examples seem to suggest that we will be recognizable to others in Heaven. Our new bodies will be gloriously different and improved, but still somewhat familiar and like our current selves.

III. HOW OLD WILL PEOPLE BE IN HEAVEN?

The Bible does not answer this question. Thus, it is possible that there will be a variety of different ages - including children, teens, adults, and seniors - in Heaven. On the other hand, everyone might be roughly the same age. If so, those who died young on earth would appear older in Heaven and those who died at an old age on earth would appear younger in Heaven. The "same age theory" is the prevailing position held by most Christian scholars. So presumably if everyone is the same age, how old will they be?

I am going to present an educated guess. Jesus died around age 33 and was recognizable after He arose to people who had only known Him for a few years. Thus, His resurrected body was likely about the same age - 30ish. Also, the first man Adam had three children with his wife Eve after the Fall suggesting that he was still young at that point. Thus, he must have been young while living in the Garden of Eden (which I believe to be much like Heaven), before he began aging. Based on these examples, I agree with the many who suggest that all people in Heaven will be young and healthy and around the age of 30.

IV. WILL PEOPLE BE NAKED IN HEAVEN?

He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. - Revelation 3:5

Since Adam and Eve were originally naked in the Garden of Eden before sin entered the world, some have wondered if we will be naked again in Heaven after sin is vanquished from it. There are several verses in the Bible - like the one cited above - that describe the garments of those abiding in Heaven. That said, it seems that people in Heaven will be clothed. The nakedness of

Adam and Eve displayed their innocence, but once sin came they needed to be covered. As the redeemed of God now, we are no longer innocent but forgiven. The clothing we wear, even in Heaven, is an enduring reminder of Jesus' atoning sacrifice at Calvary that covered our sins.

V. WILL PEOPLE EAT IN HEAVEN?

Then he said to me, "Write, 'Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.'" And he said to me, "These are true words of God." - Revelation 19:19

The marriage supper of the Lamb is widely believed to take place in Heaven sometime during the last days. If this is the case, what will people be doing during this spectacular supper? Eating of course - in Heaven! In addition to this example, Jesus told His apostles during the Lord's Supper that He'd drink with them again one day in the Kingdom of God. In Revelation we read of the river of life and tree of life, and are told to drink freely of its waters and presumably to eat of its fruit. I believe that these passages, and perhaps others, are enough to reasonably conclude that eating and drinking in Heaven is quite likely.

VI. WILL PEOPLE HAVE MEMORIES IN HEAVEN?

"For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things will not be remembered or come to mind." - Isaiah 65:17

Two weeks ago, when we discussed the present heaven, one of its attributes was that people retained at least some of their memories. The martyrs of Revelation 6 remembered their deaths and urged the Lord to avenge them. As discussed earlier, people will recognize each other in Heaven which requires the memory of who they are or were. In the future heaven - the New Heavens and New Earth - there is no more pain. Therefore, it seems plausible that all painful memories will be forgotten. Any and all memories that would cause sorrow or grief will be erased and "not come to mind" any more.

VII. WILL PEOPLE BE MARRIED IN HEAVEN?

For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. - Matthew 22:30

Jesus explained to the Sadducees that there would be no marriage in Heaven. That does not mean that former husbands and wives will not know each other. However, their relationship will be different than on earth - perhaps they'll be close friends. God instituted marriage to provide a suitable helper for the man, to address loneliness, and for procreation. None of these issues will exist in Heaven, so marriage is unnecessary. People will be like angels in the sense that they will not be married to one another. As the church of God, we are the "bride" of Christ and our only "husband" in Heaven will be Jesus Himself.

VIII. WILL THERE BE ANIMALS IN HEAVEN? PETS?

And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little boy will lead them. Also the cow and the bear will graze, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den. - Isaiah 11:6-8

Most Bible scholars believe that the passage above refers to the millennial reign of Christ on earth. Notice the animals live in peace with one another - no predators and prey. If there are animals on earth then, isn't it reasonable to think they'd continue on into the New Heavens and New Earth? If we accept that the future heaven will be much like God's original creation, we would have to recognize that animals were present in the Garden of Eden before the Fall. Furthermore, John describes animal like "creatures" many times in his revelation of Heaven. He even describes those riding on horses departing Heaven to bring about persecution on the earth during the Tribulation. While the Bible never indicates whether or not any of these animals are pets, it does strongly suggest that there may be animals in Heaven.

IX. WHAT LANGUAGE WILL PEOPLE SPEAK IN HEAVEN?

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. - 1 Corinthians 13:1

Some have suggested that there is a heavenly language that all redeemed people will speak and understand in the hereafter. The more "charismatic" churches teach that Spirit-filled people will, on occasion, speak in "strange" tongues even now. I don't discount this possibility. However, Baptists have traditionally understood the gift of tongues as it is described in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost. A literal reading of this passage states that each person heard the apostles preaching in their own native language - not that they were all communicating in a common divine or heavenly language. While the Bible does not directly answer this question, I personally believe that if we speak in our own native language in Heaven others will hear and understand in theirs, and vice versa. The bottom line - we will be able to communicate one way or another.

X. WHAT WILL PEOPLE DO IN HEAVEN?.

There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His bond-servants will serve Him; - Revelation 22:3

The Bible does not provide a list of all the activities that we will do in Heaven. However, we do know that we will serve God in any number of different ways. We will ever worship Him and praise His holy name. This will not become a mundane or meaningless practice, but rather will be glorious and fulfilling. We will spend eternity growing in our understanding of God - ie,

learning more about Him. We will exercise authority over the New Earth, presumably in a similar manner as Adam did in the Garden. Heaven will be a garden paradise filled with wonder, beauty, and many things to keep us busy. We don't know everything we'll do in Heaven, but whatever it is will be fabulous!

CONCLUSION

As we close today's message, perhaps you have other questions about Heaven that you'd like to ask. As I said during the introduction, feel free to share them with me and I'll try to find an answer for you. I do hope that the ten questions we just answered have broadened your understanding and appreciation of Heaven. Next week we will conclude our discussion of Heaven as we consider different rewards that believers can receive there.

Rewards and Crowns

Originally Preached 3/19/2017

I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, so that no one will take your crown. - Revelation 3:11

This is our tenth message in the “Heaven and Hell” sermon series. Over the course of this study, we have briefly explored the Biblical doctrine of each place. We have learned some physical characteristics of both, God’s purpose for both, the duration of both, possible locations of both, the three different variations of both, and more. Today we will wrap-up our teaching on Heaven with a message titled “Rewards in Heaven”.

As you may recall, earlier in this series we talked about possible degrees of punishment in Hell. But what about Heaven? Does the Bible have anything to say about different types of awards there? As a matter of fact, it does! Scripture mentions various rewards in Heaven, including five distinct crowns, that will be granted to those who’ve earned them. Each of these crowns has unique characteristics that we will discuss in today’s message.

Before we begin analyzing them individually, let’s first explain that these crowns are not like those worn by kings and queens. This is a common misconception. The Greek word *stephanos*, which has commonly been translated as crowns, actually means wreaths. It refers to prizes that were awarded during public sporting events, most notably the ancient Olympics. Small wreaths or garlands of leaves were placed upon the victor’s heads indicating that they’d won the contest. Like athletes who had competed well and earned a crown for their efforts, so also we as Christians can receive crowns for various accomplishments on earth.

I. THE IMPERISHABLE CROWN

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified. - 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

The imperishable crown, also called the incorruptible crown, is awarded to those who exercise godly self-discipline or self-control. They have conditioned or trained their flesh to submit to their spirit. In other words, they have learned to “deny themselves” just as Jesus instructed His followers. Their own carnal desires have given way to God’s will for their lives. All Christians who surrender themselves fully to Christ and faithfully follow His commands may receive this crown. Such people will accomplish much for the cause of Christ - they will bear fruit. Thus, we are urged to live with purpose and run to win. Some have called this reward the victor’s crown.

I admit it - I've never been much of an athlete. When I played sports back in the day, it was usually just for fun. I lost many more games than I won. I just did not have a strong passion for winning, or the necessary desire to practice hard. Years later, I've seen this type of attitude sometimes creep into my walk with God. Like me, there are many believers who struggle at times with lazy or complacent Christianity. We are okay with losing. We like to remind ourselves that salvation is not based on works, but we fail to remember that we've been saved to do good works. As such, our performance does matter. Jesus calls us to be conquerors, and this requires discipline and determination. We are expected to achieve.

II. THE CROWN OF REJOICING

For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation [rejoicing]? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? - 1 Thessalonians 2:19

Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, in this way stand firm in the Lord, my beloved - Philippians 4:1

Paul stated that the Thessalonian Christians themselves, who would someday return with Jesus at the second coming, were the reason for his hope, his joy, and his crown of rejoicing. Paul and his counterparts had founded this church during his second missionary journey, having first led many of these Thessalonians to faith in Jesus. As a reward for sharing the gospel with them, Paul stated that he'd receive a special crown. For the same reason, he also called the Philippian church his crown. It seems that this award is given to those who lead lost people to faith in Christ.

The crown of rejoicing is sometimes called the soul-winner's crown. There is a strong connection between these two things. As a Christian, my single greatest source of joy is the assurance that I've been saved. The Bible teaches that there is great joy in Heaven whenever a lost person comes to Jesus. If you have ever led a person to Christ, you've certainly experienced the tremendous joy that Paul is talking about in these verses. The crown of rejoicing is available to every believer who intentionally shares the good news of Jesus Christ with the lost.

III. THE CROWN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

In the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing. - 2 Timothy 4:8

As his death approached, Paul looked forward to a receiving crown of righteousness that Jesus would give to him "on that day". He stated that this crown would be given to him and to all who have loved His appearing. Stated another way, this prize is reserved for those who eagerly long

for Christ's return. This desire to see Him is indicative of their sincere love for Him. I like to think of this trophy as the lover's crown.

Those who truly love Jesus will be anxious for His return. Sadly, there are many Christians whose love for the Lord is mediocre at best. They may have placed their faith in Jesus and say that they love Him, but in truth they feel very little affection for Him. They love other things much more than Him. They aren't in any hurry for Jesus' return - they'd much rather He wait. Thank God we are saved on the basis of His love for us, rather than our love for Him. If it were the other way around, we'd be in a heap of trouble.

IV. THE CROWN OF GLORY

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. - 1 Peter 5:1-4

The crown of glory has also been called the elder's crown. There are multiple perspectives among Christian denominations regarding the Biblical role of elders. Most Southern Baptists identify the elder as the pastor (or a pastor) of the local church. As such, we believe that the crown of glory is reserved for pastors who shepherd their flocks well. Arguably, this award could be given to other church leaders and individuals who serve in a similar capacity. Peter suggests that the crown of glory is set aside exclusively for pastors and/or other elders who are leaders within the church.

The local church, in many ways, is an extension of the pastor himself. His faithfulness to God and care for the flock entrusted to him is critical to its success. Those who lead their congregations well are required to pour themselves out sacrificially on behalf of their people. They face unique challenges within the ministry that most others don't appreciate or understand. Church leadership is a tremendous responsibility, but is also a special blessing. The local church is and should be the glory of the pastor, which is why this crown is so named.

V. THE CROWN OF LIFE

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. - Revelation 2:10

Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. - James 1:12

The crown of life is closely associated with suffering and even martyrdom. It is given to those who endure severe persecution for the cause of Christ. In many cases, God's children have been killed for their uncompromising faith. Isn't it fitting that those who've suffered mercilessly - some even to the point of death - would be given a crown of life? Some have called this reward the martyr's crown.

Credible organizations estimate that approximately 90,000 Christians were martyred last year. These numbers have remained consistent for the past decade. Christianity has been and continues to be the most heavily persecuted religion in the world. Many nations around the globe are extremely hostile toward those who follow Jesus. Churches are forced to operate in secret or underground. When a Christian is discovered in these countries, they are often executed if they refuse to renounce their beliefs. In the United States we don't commonly see this level of persecution - but we may someday soon.

CONCLUSION

The Bible speaks repeatedly about rewards which will be given to those in Heaven. These include the five specific crowns, or wreaths, that we've learned about today. Crowns will be awarded to those who have disciplined their flesh, led others to Christ, loved the Lord's appearing, endured extreme persecution for His sake, and led their flocks honorably. I trust that many of us here today will be recipients of one or more of these crowns.

In the end, however, the greatest reward by far will be Jesus Himself. Though He will give crowns to many people for their faithful service in this life, they will seem trivial items in light of the Lord's presence. Scripture pictures the redeemed in Heaven casting their crown's at the Savior's feet as an act of worship and submission to Him. While these five crowns are something we can and should strive for, these aspirations are not for our own glory. Ultimately these awards will pale in comparison to the majesty and splendor of Christ.

Where Are You Going?

Originally Preached 3/26/17

He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life - 1 John 5:12

The Bible clearly teaches that there are only two options in the afterlife - Heaven or Hell. Every person, immediately following their physical death, will go directly to one place or the other where they will subsequently remain for all of eternity. Recognizing this truth, we have spent the past 10 weeks carefully studying both locations. We've explored the fundamental doctrines of both Heaven and Hell, and broadened our understanding of both destinations.

In this final message of the "Heaven and Hell" series, we will briefly review and reemphasize some of the major points that were presented during this informative study. We will identify and discuss some similarities and differences between the two. We will also read an important SBC resolution that seeks to differentiate between the Biblical teachings about the afterlife and those promoted in popular culture.

Finally, we will ask perhaps the most important questions of this entire series. These are questions that each person must answer for himself or herself. While the information we've learned in this study has been extremely interesting, it is useless unless acted upon. If you were to die today, would you go to Heaven or Hell? What must someone do to go to Heaven?

I. AN IMPORTANT RESOLUTION

Let's begin with a resolution that was released by the Southern Baptist Convention back in 2014. At its annual meeting in Baltimore that year, the messengers in attendance adopted a measure called "The Sufficiency of Scripture Regarding the Afterlife". This statement lays out the official position of the SBC regarding this issue.

In the months and years immediately prior to this resolution's passage, several movies and books had been released that dealt with life after death. Some of the more notable ones included "Heaven is for Real", "90 Minutes in Heaven", and "23 Minutes in Hell". These stories are basically the testimonies of people who've died, briefly gone to Heaven or Hell, and then were miraculously resuscitated. They report details about what was seen, heard, and felt by people who visited the hereafter.

While these testimonies are certainly intriguing and insightful, many people - including some devout Christians - began to base their understanding of Heaven and Hell on them rather than on the actual teachings of scripture. Anytime people began to base their theology upon the subjective, experiential accounts of others rather than upon the absolute truth of the Bible itself problems invariably ensue. The Southern Baptist Convention sought to address this growing

concern with the release of its resolution, which I fully support. Nevertheless, many people today are still prone and susceptible to base their beliefs on extra-biblical or even anti-biblical teachings which they see in a movie or read in a book.

In this series, I have intentionally shied away from citing the personal testimonies of those who've died and been brought back to life. I don't necessarily reject these stories, but choose to instead to build my theology solely upon what is written in the Bible. I urge you to do likewise. In some cases, the Bible does not tell us all we'd like to know about the afterlife, but it does tell us all we need to know about it.

II. A BRIEF REVIEW

Before we wrap-up this study, let's take a moment to review some of the major things we've learned about Heaven and Hell. We have elaborated on each of these points in previous sermons, but for now we will just summarize them briefly.

There are some similarities between Heaven and Hell. Both are literal places where people go after their physical death. Both places are eternal or never-ending. Those present in either place remain there permanently (there is no leaving). God is spatially present and sovereignly rules over both places (He is omnipresent). People in both Heaven and Hell will have a resurrected body which is conscious of and sensitive to its surroundings. There may be differing degrees of punishment in Hell and there will be differing types of rewards (such as crowns) in Heaven. Also, there are three variations or dispensations of both.

Obviously, there are also several differences between Heaven and Hell. Hell is a place of unquenchable fire, outer darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth, and the undying worm. Heaven, on the other hand, is a beautiful paradise that is illuminated constantly by God's glory where there is no more suffering, sorrow, or pain. Hell is a place of punishment, but Heaven is a place of blessing and rejoicing. God's favor will be absent in Hell; God's wrath will be absent in Heaven. Hell is a place we descend down into, perhaps below the ground at the center of the earth; but Heaven (presently) is a place we ascend up to, perhaps beyond the clouds somewhere in the sky or space. Ultimately, Heaven will be on the renewed Earth. Hell will be occupied by the Devil, the Antichrist, the False Prophet, the fallen angels (demons), and all unregenerate (unsaved) people. Heaven will be occupied by God - the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, all of His angels, and all regenerate (saved) people.

There were many other details we've covered over the course of this series, but these are enough to paint a pretty clear picture of Heaven and Hell. So, with these two images in mind, we come to our final question. This is perhaps the most important one of them all...

III. A FINAL QUESTION

The Bible teaches that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God". Every person who

has ever lived is a sinner - they have disobeyed God's commands to some degree or another - and stands guilty before the One. The LORD, being righteous and just, hates sin and therefore condemns the wicked transgressors to Hell. Thus, Hell is the default destiny for every person because of their sinful nature and deeds. Hell is open to all, and the vast majority of people end up there.

But Heaven is by invitation only - and only few accept it. God sent His son, Jesus, to die as a sacrifice to pay for the sin of mankind. Jesus bore the wrath of God as our substitute, and in Him we can receive forgiveness and salvation. The LORD has invited us spend eternity with Him in Heaven, and Jesus is the only ticket. There is no other way to gain entrance. No other god can get you in. No amount of good deeds will get you there. Jesus is the only way.

So... where are you going? If you have accepted Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior, and sincerely committed your life to following Him, then you've said yes to God's invitation. In this case, you are Heaven bound. But if you've rejected Christ and disregarded your invitation, choosing instead to follow your own way, then Hell awaits.

CONCLUSION

It is a good thing to intellectually know about Heaven and Hell - it is a far greater thing to personally know the God who created them. The dire prospect of eternity in Hell should drive lost people to Jesus. The glorious promise of eternity in Heaven should provide encouragement and hope to all believers. The doctrine of Heaven and Hell is important to a well-rounded, comprehensive understanding of the Christian faith.

On The Reality Of Hell

Resolution adopted by the SBC in Phoenix, AZ - 2011

WHEREAS, Rob Bell, in his 2011 book, Love Wins, has called into question the church's historical teaching on the doctrine of eternal punishment of the unregenerate; and

WHEREAS, The church has addressed this issue throughout her history, yet orthodox Christians have affirmed consistently and resoundingly the reality of a literal Hell; and

WHEREAS, The Bible clearly teaches that God will judge the lost at the end of the age (Matthew 25:41-46; 2 Peter 2:9; Revelation 20:11-15); and

WHEREAS, God must judge the unregenerate because He is a holy God whose judgments are altogether righteous (Psalm 96:10; Romans 2:1-5; Revelation 15:3); and

WHEREAS, The Scriptures affirm that this judgment of the unconverted is a judgment unto conscious, eternal suffering apart from the steadfast love and grace of God (Matthew 7:23; 25:46; Luke 16:22-25; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10); and

WHEREAS, The Bible precludes the possibility of any opportunity for salvation after death (Hebrews 9:27), urging sinners instead to embrace the glorious gospel today (2 Corinthians 6:2; Hebrews 2:3; 3:13); and

WHEREAS, Jesus Christ and the apostles, out of their love for lost people, affirmed the reality of Hell in their own preaching to urge sinners to receive the grace of God, to repent of their sins, and to believe the gospel, and thereby to enter into abundance of eternal life (Matthew 10:28; John 10:10; Acts 17:30-31); and

WHEREAS, The prospect of fellow human beings, created in the image of God, spending eternity in Hell grieves us deeply; and

WHEREAS, The Scriptures exhort the church to hold fast to and proclaim the "faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3) and to "guard the good deposit" of truth the Lord has entrusted to us in His Word (1 Timothy 6:20; 2 Timothy 1:14), including difficult truths; and

WHEREAS, The Baptist Faith & Message affirms the biblical teaching that "Christ will judge all men in righteousness. The unrighteous will be consigned to Hell, the place of everlasting punishment" (Article X. Last Things); now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, That the messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention, meeting in Phoenix, Arizona, June 14-15, 2011, do hereby affirm our belief in the biblical teaching on eternal, conscious punishment of the unregenerate in Hell; and be it finally

RESOLVED, That out of our love for Christ and for His glory, and our love for lost people and our deep desire that they not suffer eternally in Hell, we implore Southern Baptists to proclaim faithfully the depth

and gravity of sin against a holy God, the reality of Hell, and the salvation of sinners by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone, to the glory of God alone.

On The Sufficiency Of Scripture Regarding The Afterlife

Resolution adopted by the SBC in Baltimore, MD - 2014

WHEREAS, There have been numerous books and movies purporting to explain or describe the afterlife experience; and

WHEREAS, These books and movies have had a considerable impact as seen in the best seller lists and high box office receipts; and

WHEREAS, Many of these books and movies have sought to describe heaven from a subjective, experiential source, mainly via personal testimonies that cannot be corroborated; and

WHEREAS, Many of these are not unified and contain details that are antithetical to Scripture; and

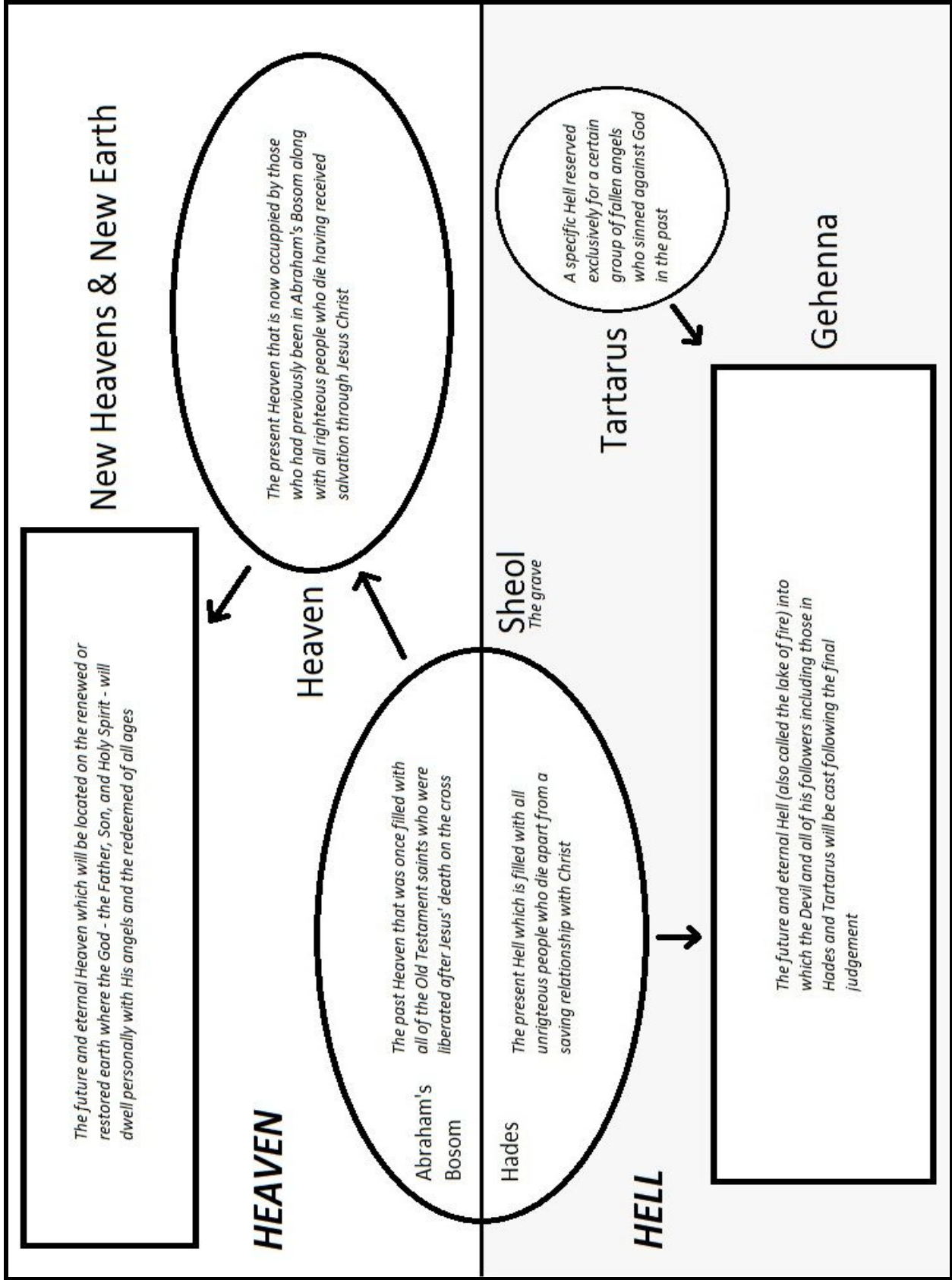
WHEREAS, Many devout and well-meaning people allow these to become their source and basis for an understanding of the afterlife rather than scriptural truth; and

WHEREAS, Though the Scriptures include explicit accounts of persons raised from the dead, such as Jairus' daughter, the widow of Nain's son, and Lazarus, in God's perfect revelatory wisdom, He has not given us any report of their individual experience in the afterlife (Deuteronomy 29:29; Mark 5:21-43; Luke 7:11-17; John 11:35-44); and

WHEREAS, The Apostle Paul wrote about "a man in Christ" who was caught up "into the third heaven" who "heard inexpressible words" that "a man is not allowed to speak" (2 Corinthians 12:1-4); and

WHEREAS, The doctrines of the afterlife are critical to a full understanding of salvation and repentance (Luke 16:29-31; John 3:16-18); now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, That the messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Baltimore, Maryland, June 10-11, 2014, reaffirm the sufficiency of biblical revelation over subjective experiential explanations to guide one's understanding of the truth about heaven and hell.



Bible Verses Used In This Sermon Series

Verses cited during the preaching on HELL

Genesis 37:34-35

Job 14:13

Psalms 9:17; 139:7-8

Isaiah 66:24

Daniel 12:1-2

Matthew 5:22; 8:12; 10:15; 11:23-24; 13:41-42; 16:18; 18:8; 22:13; 25:41; 25:46

Mark 8:47-48; 9:43; 12:38-40

Luke 10:13-15; 12:5; 12:47-48; 13:27-28; 16:22b-23a; 16:24; 20:46-47

John 3:18; 5:28-29; 19:11

Romans 2:6-8; 4:25

1 Corinthians 6:9-10

Galatians 2:20

Ephesians 4:8-10

2 Thessalonians 1:8-9

James 2:10

2 Peter 2:4

Jude 1:6; 1:7; 1:12-13

Revelation 14:10; 19:20; 20:12; 20:14-15; 21:8

Verses cited during the preaching on HEAVEN

Genesis 1:16-17; 1:20

Job 19:25-26

Ecclesiastes 12:6-7

Isaiah 11:6; 65:17; 65:18-19

Matthew 17:2-3; 22:30

Mark 16:19

Luke 16:22

John 14:1-3; 20:16

Acts 1:9-11

Romans 8:18-22

1 Corinthians 9:24-27; 13:1; 15:41-42

2 Corinthians 5:8; 12:2; 12:3-4

Ephesians 4:8-9

Philippians 1:21-23; 4:1

Colossians 3:1-4

1 Thessalonians 2:19; 4:17

2 Timothy 4:8

Hebrews 11:16; 12:1

James 1:12

1 Peter 3:18-19; 5:1-4

2 Peter 3:7; 3:13

Revelation 2:7; 2:10; 3:5; 3:11; 4:2; 4:4; 6:9-11; 19:19; 21:1-3; 21:4; 21:5a; 21:6; 21:10; 21:23-25; 22:1-2; 22:3; 22:5