

## Making Sense of Heaven and Hell

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A reading from God's Holy Scripture: Revelation 21:1-8 (This is God's Word.)

Charles Darwin, the famous scientist and evolutionary theorist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, once said:

*I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so the plain language of the [biblical] text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my father, brother, and almost all my best friends, will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine.*

Clearly, for Charles Darwin, a literal hell had no place for proper humans to believe.

Now, some of you might not be surprised that Charles Darwin had issues with hell, but did you know that well-known professing Christians have had similar concerns.

C.S. Lewis, the 20<sup>th</sup> century British scholar and ardent defender of Christianity and even a believer in a literal hell, once remarked: "There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power."

This past week I was reading a book that defended the traditional doctrine of hell. It was written in 2011 by a pastor who for the first many years of being a pastor did not believe in a literal hell, but eventually through rigorous Bible study came to believe the Bible's unrelenting teaching on the reality of hell and final judgment. The title of the book seems fitting: "Hell is Real," but what caught me was his subtitle: **Hell Is Real: But I Hate To Admit It.**

Even people who believe in hell are unsettled by it. Before we dig into the Biblical text, I want to ask just a few open-ended questions:

- 1) Why does the doctrine of hell bother the human conscience?
- 2) Why doesn't the doctrine of heaven bother us?
- 3) Or why are we comfortable with God being a God of love, but we're not so sure about God being a God of justice?
- 4) Could our 21<sup>st</sup> century, westernized, Americanized, postmodernized views of the world possibly be off?

Miroslav Volf is a professor at Yale University. Volf is a Croatian by birth, his father became a Christian in a communist labor camp. Volf himself grew up in Marxist controlled Yugoslavia as a young boy. In his award winning book, *Exclusion and Embrace*, he pushes on the modern mind that has such a problem with hell and a God of judgment. He writes this:

My thesis . . . will be unpopular with many Christians, especially theologians in the West. . . . I suggest imagining that you are delivering a lecture in a war zone. . . . Among your listeners are

people whose cities and villages have been first plundered, then burned and leveled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit. . . . Soon you would discover that it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human nonviolence corresponds to God's refusal to judge. In a scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die.

In short: Only in the suburbs does a God who judges seem unfair. In the real world, filled with violence, sin, and destruction, cries for justice ring out to God. God is not deaf to these cries. He will not sit idle forever.

And so it turns out, the Bible speaks of heaven and hell with just these sorts of ideas. We turn now to these eight verses in the book of revelation.

To guide our time I want to ask four big questions:

- 1) Do heaven and hell exist? (the places)
- 2) Why do heaven and hell exist? (the purposes)
- 3) Who goes to heaven and hell? (the people)
- 4) How should we respond? (the practical implications)

Question #1: Do heaven and hell exist?

Answer: Yes. Clearly, for the Apostle John heaven and hell were real places. He had visions of God confirming their realities. John is not writing about metaphors. He is writing about places.

Look at vv. 1-2: Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. <sup>2</sup> I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. Then, you have the end of v. 8: they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."

John is seeing places. Later in chapters 21 and 22, John will describe more of the beauty of heaven, with precise detail. Some will say John is just using symbols and metaphors, but that seems inaccurate. Yes, the physical objects in heaven like the tree of life or the fire of hell have symbolic value, but its value is lost if the objects and realities themselves do not exist.

When the 18<sup>th</sup> century founder of Methodism was asked if Jesus meant real fire when he spoke of hell, John Wesley responded:

...it is either fire or something worse....consider this: Does not our Lord speak as if it were real fire? No one can deny or doubt of this. Is it possible then to suppose that the God of truth would speak in this manner if it were not so? Does he design to fright his poor creatures? What, with scarecrows?

With vain shadows of things that have no being? O let not anyone think so! Impute not such folly to the Most High!

For those of you who may believe hell is hardly mentioned in the Bible or that Jesus didn't speak about it, know that Jesus spoke about hell more than any other person. And that heaven and hell were spoken of by almost every major contributor to the New Testament. For example:

<sup>NIV</sup> **Matthew 8:11** I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>12</sup> But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." -Jesus

<sup>NIV</sup> **Matthew 25:41** "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. -Jesus

<sup>NIV</sup> **2 Thessalonians 1:7** This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. <sup>8</sup> He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. <sup>9</sup> They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might. -Apostle Paul

In Jude 1:13 and 2 Peter 2:17, you can read of people being sent into the utter darkness forever.

And just in case, someone thinks heaven and hell were just made up by Christians in the New Testament, the Old Testament prophet Daniel describes the future state this way: <sup>NAS</sup> **Daniel 12:2** "And 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.

Heaven is for real. Hell is for real. These places exist.

Next question: Why do heaven and hell exist?

A great summary of what Revelation 21:1-8 comes from the pen of a theology professor named Wayne Grudem. He writes, "...the final judgment will take place so that God can display his glory to all mankind by demonstrating **his justice and mercy simultaneously.**"

Heaven exists because God exists as a God full of grace and mercy.

Hell exists because God exists as a God full of justice and truth.

Heaven is the final exclamation point to a history of God showing mercy and grace to His people. He promised sinful Adam and Eve that Satan would be crushed. He promised sinful Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that they and every nation on the earth would be blessed. God promised to save every sinful person who believed in Jesus from death. God promised to crush evil, death, and sin.

Look at vv. 3-4. This is the fulfillment of God's merciful promises: <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them.

They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. <sup>4</sup> 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

God's mercy is complete when he dwells with His people, when sin, sorrow and sadness are no more.

But God's justice is not complete until all evil and evil doers are dealt justice.

<sup>8</sup> But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars--they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."

All rebels and evil doers must be stopped.

Like parents whose children are brutally killed require justice on the violators. God the Father will bring justice on those who violate his people, his creation, and His character.

In 2001, Rebecca Manley Pippert wrote a book entitled, *Hope Has Its Reasons*. In it, she asks why is it ok for God to get angry? Why is it ok for God to punish? She writes:

*'Think how we feel when we see someone we love ravaged by unwise actions or relationships. Do we respond with benign tolerance as we might toward strangers? Far from it.... Anger isn't the opposite of love. Hate is, and the final form of hate is indifference.'*

*If I, a flawed narcissistic sinful woman, can feel this much pain and anger over someone's condition, how much more a morally perfect God who made them? God's wrath is not a cranky explosion, but his settled opposition to the cancer of sin which is eating out the insides of the human race he loves with his whole being.' "*

God cannot let unrepentant, ongoing sin go unpunished. He doesn't fly off the handle; he waits patiently. But in the end, he has to act. The great scholar JI Packer explains it this way: "God's wrath in the Bible is never the capricious, self-indulgent, irritable morally ignoble thing that human anger so often is. It is, instead, a right and necessary reaction to objective moral evil."

Heaven is a safe dwelling for his children because all the evil has been removed. Finally, the abused children's tears are wiped away. Finally the rape victims are sheltered from their perpetrators. Finally, the bride of Jesus isn't pursued by Satan.

Put another way, Pastor Scott Sauls writes, "If God is a God of love without the accountability of justice, then vulnerable people become more vulnerable, and bullies are encouraged to continue bullying. We need a God who gets angry. We need a God who will protect his kids, who will once and for all remove bullies and perpetrators of evil from his playground."

But is God unfair? Do we really deserve punishment? How much is really deserved?

You can be sure of this, writes the 18<sup>th</sup> century scholar, Jonathan Edwards, “you will not suffer beyond what strict justice requires.” The issue is, however, strict justice requires eternal suffering. Sinning against a holy, eternal God, requires a holy, eternal punishment. As I mentioned a few weeks ago, if you run up and spit on me today, not much will happen to you. But if you run up and spit on the President of the US tomorrow, the Secret Service will have you on the ground.

If you leave the Rotary Club, you won’t be punished except with raised eyebrows. If you walk off a field of battle in the middle of war, you’ll be shot for treason.

The dignity of a person or institution impacts the consequence for your affront. If you sin against the perfect God of the universe, a perfect, ongoing punishment is what strict justice requires.

*Why do heaven and hell exist? “...the final judgment will take place so that God can display his glory to all mankind by demonstrating his justice and mercy simultaneously.”*

The places exist. They have purposes. But what about the people?

Question #3) Who goes to heaven and hell?

**One major reason the doctrines of heaven and hell offend so many people is they falsely believe that heaven is for good people and that hell is for bad people. Thus, to have someone say, you are at risk of going to hell, you interpret this as, “You think I’m an awful person.”**

The Bible doesn’t break the populations of heaven and hell into such neat categories. Many of the people who Scripture insinuates are in heaven did pretty awful things. Abraham cheated on his wife and sent his mistress into the wild. Moses murdered. King David committed adultery and murdered the husband to cover up his tracks. Samson slept with prostitutes and loose women.

Revelation 21 describes two qualities of those on their way to heaven:

1. Thirsty people coming to God for the drink of life.
2. Persevering people who hold onto God despite the rough rode.

First idea, heaven is for thirsty people who have come to God to drink from the spring of the water of life. God himself says, “To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life.”

These people confess that through their own powers, choices, and lifestyles they have courted death. Their souls are thirsty for life. They’ve drunk the poisons of selfishness and sin, and need a cool drink from the springs of God’s love and mercy. These are not perfect people; these are desperate people. Heaven is for people who repent from going their own way and who desire to come to God. They realize they cannot buy their way to heaven, they have to take the cup of water that is free. This cup of free salvation was purchased for them by Jesus Christ on the cross.

He drank the cup of wrath, suffering, and sin from God, so that they can drink from the cup of life, joy, and blessing.

Who goes to heaven? Thirsty people coming to God for the drink of life.

But more than that, these people hang on to Jesus. It's not a one-and-done prayer or spiritual decision that ensures heaven. You can't perform a 5 minute transaction with the Holy God, as if he's an ATM dispensing the hope of heaven if you dial the right 4-digit pin. <sup>7</sup> Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.

Our ability to overcome and be victorious is rooted in our faith. We continue to believe in God, we recognize there is no hope elsewhere. We know that to fear and follow any other person or being will leave us in jeopardy, and so we hold on. We hear Jesus saying, Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. (<sup>NIV</sup> **Matthew 10:28** ). We hear these truths and so we persevere.

Thirsty people who never let go will one day know the full and rich inheritance of heaven.

But what about hell? Who gets sent there?

John tells us: <sup>8</sup> But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars--they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."

The major idea on who goes to hell can be discerned by the fact that these descriptions are nouns, not verbs (cf. 1 Cor. 6:9-11). Those who go to hell are people so characterized by their sins that they become the sinful practice themselves. They are unrepentant sinners. They don't turn from lying because lying works for them. They don't believe because agnosticism works for them. They engage in all manner of sexual behavior because that's just who they are. They've identified themselves with sin and with rejecting God and His ways, that their final judgment gives them what they've wanted their whole lives: an eternity without God.

One modern day pastor, JD Greear, put it this way: "If you accept Jesus just to 'get out of hell,' then you'd hate heaven, because only those who love and trust God will enjoy heaven." His point is, hell is for sinners. Hell is for people who love sin. They don't love God. They love other things. And so in one sense, God gives them what they want...

Now, that's still not going to sit well with some people in this room or at your office. It doesn't seem fair. What about the people who are honestly mistaken? What about the people who are just acting on what they think is best?

Well, I think C.S. Lewis develops a profound answer to these questions in his fictional book on final judgment *The Great Divorce*. I'm going to read to you a short snippet where two people who have died are debating whether it's fair for God to make judgments on sincerely deceived people. Listen to the dialog:

"This is worse than I expected. Do you really think people are penalised for their honest opinions? Even assuming, for the sake of argument, that those opinions were mistaken."

"Do you really think there are no sins of intellect?"

"There are indeed, Dick. There is hide-bound prejudice, and intellectual dishonesty, and timidity, and stagnation. But honest opinions fearlessly followed-they are not sins."

"I know we used to talk that way. I did it too until the end of my life when I became what you call narrow. It all turns on what are honest opinions."

"Mine certainly were. They were not only honest but heroic. I asserted them fearlessly. When the doctrine of the Resurrection ceased to commend itself to the critical faculties which God had given me, I openly rejected it. I preached my famous sermon. I defied the whole chapter. I took every risk."

"What risk? What was at all likely to come of it except what actually came-popularity, sales for your books, invitations, and finally a bishopric?"

"Dick, this is unworthy of you. What are you suggesting?"

"Friend, I am not suggesting at all. You see, I know now. Let us be frank. Our opinions were not honestly come by. We simply found ourselves in contact with a certain current of ideas and plunged into it because it seemed modern and successful. At College, you know, we just started automatically writing the kind of essays that got good marks and saying the kind of things that won applause. When, in our whole lives, did we honestly face, in solitude, the one question on which all turned: whether after all the Supernatural might not in fact occur? When did we put up one moment's real resistance to the loss of our faith?"

Miroslav Volf captures the heart and attitude of all those who go to hell:

God will judge, not because God gives people what they deserve, but because some people refuse to receive what no one deserves; *if evildoers experience God's terror, it will not be because they have done evil, but because they have resisted to the end the powerful lure of the open arms of the crucified Messiah*" (p. 298).

These are people who do not want God. They love their sin too much.

Do heaven and hell exist? Yes

Why do heaven and hell exist? To display both God's mercy and justice.

Who goes to heaven and hell? Those who seek mercy find heaven; those who seek sin find hell.

How should we response?

What are the practical implications?

Let me give three implications: Meditation, Application, and Proclamation

First, let this not be the last time you meditate on the glories of heaven and the horrors of hell. Meditate often on heaven. People have foolishly said that you can be so heavenly minded that you're no earthly good. The reality is the more heavenly minded you are the more earthly good you'll do every single day. Think of these lines from Mark Cahill's book, *The One Thing You Can't Do in Heaven*,

"Three-hundred million years from now, what will be the only thing what will matter? Will it matter how much money you made? Will it matter what kind of car you drove? Will I matter who won the NCAA football and basketball titles this year? Will it matter who you took to the homecoming dance?"

Three-hundred-million years from now, the only thing that will matter is whether you're in Heaven or in Hell. And if that is the only thing that will matter then, that should be one of our greatest concerns now. The real question then is: What are you doing of significance today that will matter three-hundred-million-plus years from now?"

Meditate. Then, move to application.

Act on what you discover about God, about heaven, and hell. A few years ago Francis Chan and Preston Sprinkle wrote a book-length treatment on the reality of final judgment. The final sentences of this book were this:

"God extends mercy to us all *now*, he wants us to know him *now*, he urges all of us *now* to be reconciled to him through his Son Jesus Christ. This door is open *now*—but it won't stay open forever."

PAUSE

Meditation, application, and finally proclamation:

[Consider the words of Penn Jillette](#), an atheist comedian:

I don't respect people who don't proselytize [tell people about Jesus]. I don't respect that at all. If you believe that there's a heaven and hell and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life or whatever, and you think that it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward . . . how much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that?

Who do you know needs to hear about heaven and hell, Jesus and sin? Think of 3 people right now. Right down there names. Commit to pray for them and commit to share with them soon.

Meditation/Application/Proclamation

Time is running out. "God extends mercy to us all *now*, he wants us to know him *now*, he urges all of us *now* to be reconciled to him through his Son Jesus Christ. This door is open *now*—but it won't stay open forever."