



# The Afterlife: Considering Heaven and Hell

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If you are a professor who teaches a course every other year on “Evil, Suffering, Death and Afterlife in the New Testament” (as I do), you should avoid trying to grade papers for that course while sitting at an airport bar. First comes the question: “Are you a teacher?” Then: “What do you teach?” And then all hope of grading is lost. Talk of afterlife leads quickly to the subjects of heaven and hell. Sometimes the questioner asks about where a person “goes” after he or she dies. Did the person go to heaven or hell? If she was good or believed in Jesus as her personal Lord and Savior, she probably went to heaven, some will say. If she was bad or didn’t believe in Jesus, she might have gone to hell. If she did go to hell, is she there forever, or is hell a place one can leave after entering?

## THE HISTORY AND LANGUAGE OF HEAVEN AND HELL

To understand the formation of New Testament views on heaven and hell, one needs to consult evidence that spans thousands of years and comes from numerous different cultures and locales.<sup>1</sup> For our purposes here, it is enough to note that the Old Testament envisions a three-part cosmos: heaven, earth, and Sheol. Everyone who dies goes to Sheol, the Pit (LXX “Hades”), regardless of their righ-

<sup>1</sup>See my book, *Death and the Afterlife in the New Testament* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006) esp. 9–59.

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teous or wicked deeds. There is an emphasis on being gathered to the ancestors (people were actually buried in ancestral tombs), and the focus is corporate rather than individual. We may refer to this as “neutral death.” However, with the rise of apocalyptic thought and literature from the second century B.C.E. on, as reflected in Dan 7–12, we see a turn from “neutral death” to “moral death.” The individual takes center stage, and the corporate aspect of judgment evanesces. During the intertestamental period, apocalyptic literature was produced that offered new cosmologies and specific descriptions of postmortem existence in heaven or hell. In these texts, one goes to heaven as a reward and to hell as a punishment, so that one’s postmortem existence depends upon moral evaluation. Satan, called by various names and aided by armies of demons, develops into a robust figure during this period.

The New Testament word for heaven is *ouranos* and it occurs 273 times in 255 verses, in every New Testament book except the Pastoral Epistles (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus), the Johannine Epistles (1, 2, and 3 John), Philemon, and Jude.

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The language of “hell” occurs in various ways in the New Testament: “Gehenna” (*geenna*) occurs twelve times. The NRSV translates gehenna as “hell,” so one does not find the word itself there or in the KJV. Gehenna refers to an actual location outside of Jerusalem where garbage was continually burned in a fire. “Hades” (*hadēs*) occurs ten times. “Abyss” (*abyssos*) occurs nine times (the occurrence in Rom 10:7 is due to Paul’s citing of Ps 107:26, which uses the Hebrew *tehom*, referring to a watery depth or deep sea, which the LXX translates as *abyssos*). “The outer darkness” (*to skotos to exōteron*) occurs three times; and four other terms each occur once: “consign to Tartarus” (*tartaroō*), “abaddon” (*abaddōn*), and “apollyon” (*apollyōn*)—Rev 9:11 uses both of the last two, providing Apollyon as the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Abaddon (place of destruction or realm of the dead).

Whereas the word translated “heaven” appears 273 times, all of the “hell” language combined occurs only 37 times. Out of 27 New Testament books, 19 use heaven language, while only 8 use something we might call “hell” language. Neither Paul nor the Fourth Evangelist, two of the major theologians and preachers of the New Testament, whose works comprise the bulk of the New Testament itself, employ any hell language (I have commented on Rom 10:7 above) or rely on a “doctrine of hell.” I find that at least noteworthy if not stunning for those of us who lean on such a notion in order to spread “good” news. (Did I mention that I am ordained in the Baptist tradition?)

## THE MEANING OF HEAVEN AND HELL

What do people *mean* by hell, anyway (or heaven, for that matter)? I play tournament racquetball. Generally speaking, I try to avoid bringing up my profession during such tournaments, since I want to focus primarily on hitting great shots, scoring as many points as possible, and winning my division—as opposed to feeling as though I am there to teach theology or hear confessions. But at one tournament, when my profession did come up, a woman took me aside and asked, “Do you believe in demons?” I naturally inquired, “Why do you ask?” As it turned out, my acquaintance (whom we will call Susan) was suffering from terrible nightmares about her mother. Her mother had recently died of lung cancer. Susan goes to a church that routinely asks: “If you died tonight would you be sure you were going to heaven instead of hell?” The destination, for them, depends upon whether one has been saved, defined as confessing one’s sins in accordance with the so-called “sinner’s prayer” and accepting Jesus as one’s personal Lord and Savior. Susan had earnestly tried to get her mother saved, but to no avail. Therefore, Susan was plagued with nightmares of her mother roasting in hell and being tormented by vicious demons, though she had been a gentle, kind, and giving woman during her lifetime.

So, by “hell” people often mean a (sometimes fiery) “place” or “state of existence” where the wicked suffer [eternal?] torment as a punishment for their bad deeds or lack of commitment to particular beliefs and doctrines. It is often considered populated by Satan and various parts of his “army,” such as demons. Writers (such as Dante) and visual artists throughout the ages have visualized and portrayed hell graphically.

In contrast, by “heaven” people often refer to a (sometimes bucolic) place where the righteous abide as a reward for their good deeds or commitment to particular beliefs and doctrines. It is often considered populated by angels and saints. Life in heaven is pain-free, idyllic, and involves continuous praise and worship of God. Many imagine it to hold whatever they love the most, from chocolate to beloved grandparents.

Do we imagine literal compartments in a fiery location in the center of Planet Earth where different types of sinners are stored? Do we imagine a giant city in the sky with pearly gates and a big house with literal rooms and people hopping from cloud to cloud?

Or does the power of heaven and hell language lie in its metaphorical meaning, as when Jesus declares himself to be the true vine, the good shepherd, or the light of the world? Is it language that is supposed to help us think deeply about why we are here, what kind of people God would like us to be, what kind of life God would love to impart to the cosmos that God created? What, at the deepest level, are the biblical authors trying to get at with the concepts of heaven and hell? What do they imply about the character, nature, and essence of God; about God’s relationship with us and our relationships with one another?

## THE ETHICS OF HEAVEN AND HELL

In modern parlance, heaven and hell are often used as part of a system of rewards and punishments aimed at getting people to behave properly and/or believe properly. Those who have their act together within this lifetime will go to heaven after death, and those who do not will be sent to hell.

### *God as a Cosmic Hitler*

But very quickly the matter gets complicated and demands deep, nuanced thought, lest we damage the progress of the kingdom by ignorance or maliciousness and, in effect, libel the character of God. Take the idea of eternal hell, for instance. Such a notion renders God a monster, morally speaking. Adolf Hitler chose to condemn and torture millions of Jews for a brief time, and the world considered him a war criminal. But many Christians routinely posit a God who will condemn and torture not millions, but billions, and not for a short while but for all eternity. Such a God is, simply put, unethical. If Christians long to worship God in order to become more like God, then we are training ourselves up to be unethical creatures who glory in religious violence. Worshiping a violent, unethical God will lead to becoming a violent, unethical people.

### *An Eternal God Constrained by Time?*

The Bible insists that “God is love” (1 John 4:16) and that God’s nature is such that God will leave the ninety-nine to go in search of the one (Luke 15:4). Who pays the all-day worker the same as the one-hour worker (Matthew 20:1–16)? Who could run a business or a nation-state on such impractical practices? Who could run a legal system wherein a person forgives the same person 490 times? That would be like saying that it makes good sense to show power through weakness, or to die in order to live, or, more to the point, to follow a crucified Messiah, apparently cursed by his own Scriptures (“Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree” Gal 3:13). But such is the God we Christians are apparently stuck with, like it or not. And truth be told, we seem to like it well enough when God forgives us, but many are quite offended when God appears to reward those other people who “do not deserve it.” So, if grace and love and incessant pursuit of the lost are just part of who God is, then why do we imagine that there comes a time when God calls the deal off? Why do we imagine, for instance, that God is limited by finite time just because we are? That is to say, why would we imagine that God cannot or does not wish to continue pursuing the one after that individual’s death? Or, as one theologian asks: “What is there in the act of dying that it should change the mind of God towards us?”<sup>2</sup>

To imagine that God is constrained and limited by time as humans are is to

<sup>2</sup>Percy Dearmer, *The Legend of Hell: An Examination of the Idea of Everlasting Punishment with a Chapter on Apocalyptic* (London: Cassell, 1929) 268, as quoted by Dale Allison in his brilliant essay, “The Problem of Gehenna,” in Dale C. Allison Jr., *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and Its Interpreters* (New York: T & T Clark, 2005) 99.

recast God in the image of human beings. To imagine that we must get a person to say the “sinner’s prayer” and accept Jesus as personal Lord and Savior before they depart this life may be to imagine a very small, a very finite God, despite our good intentions.<sup>3</sup>

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*“What is there in the act of dying that it should  
change the mind of God towards us?”*

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And “eternal hell” raises another problem, especially for someone like the Apostle Paul, who certainly espouses no such doctrine and never uses the language of hell. Once you understand Paul’s theology and eschatology, it makes sense that he does not. In 1 Cor 15, Paul’s classic statement on the resurrection and the wrapping up of human history, Paul notes that, to date, only Jesus has been resurrected. At Jesus’ coming (*parousia*, v. 23), others will be raised. In v. 28, we learn that when all is said and done, God will be *panta en pasin*—“all in all” or “everything to everyone.” If, when all is done, there is still a place or a group of people for whom it is patently *not* the case that God is all in all, then God’s victory is not complete, not ultimate, not perfect. It may be 99.9% successful, but unless God is, in fact, everything to everyone, then God’s victory is only “almost perfect,” at which, of course, Paul would balk (and, in my estimation, so should we). A doctrine of eternal hell would contradict Paul’s theology, his Christology, and his soteriology, at the very least. The cross would have been helpful, and death will have taken a hit, but Paul would not be able to proclaim confidently the absolute destruction of death.

Likewise, you will find no hell language in the Fourth Gospel, a gospel that depicts Jesus as preexistent and participating in the very creation of the cosmos: “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (John 1:3). All of it is God’s own. If the “ruler of this world” appears to have some kind of power and control, we must understand that the incarnation itself marked the end of that rule: “*Now* is the judgment of this world; *now* the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw *all people* to myself” (John 12:31–32, emphasis added).

At this point, I can hear a number of questions raised or protests lodged (at least this is what I hear when I teach on this subject in seminary and in parishes). “Are you arguing for universal salvation? If so, if God is going to save everyone anyway, why be moral?” Let’s separate out some of the issues.

## HEAVEN, HELL, AND POSTMORTEM JUDGMENT

### *The Justice of God*

Ultimately, Christian language about heaven and hell is language about *justice*. God is just, and God judges. While there are many biblical books that have no

<sup>3</sup>For more on this, see Craig C. Hill, *In God’s Time: The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

notion of hell, there is no biblical book that eschews the notion of justice and God's judgment of us on the basis of it. At its heart, justice is a *communal* and *eschatological* principle.

*Communal*: Justice is communal because it has to do with how we treat one another; it is eschatological because it is aimed at the kingdom of God, of treating one another in accordance with the eyes of God and the will of God such that it may be "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10).

Why do we forgive beyond the limits of reason alone? Because God does. Why do we visit those in prison, clothe the naked, visit the sick, and feed the hungry? Because when we do it unto the "least of these," we do it to God (Matt 25:31–46).

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Justice is a communal, not a personal, dynamic. In that passage from Matt 25, eschatological judgment rests upon how we treated the least of these, not whether we believed this or that about the Trinity or whether we ascribed to justification by faith through grace. In fact, Matthew's Jesus would almost be happier if we just said nothing and acted—he seems to be the original purveyor of the adage "actions speak louder than words." Matthew's Jesus isn't particularly interested in our pious confessions. He would rather watch where and how we spend our time and money. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.' Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock" (Matt 7:21–24).

And Paul, too, is happy to admit that we will be judged on the basis of our deeds:

For [God] will repay according to each one's deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. (Rom 2:6–8)

We could easily multiply the examples. But there are at least three lessons from these biblical authors related to justice and judgment: (1) Deeds matter and form the basis of judgment. Beliefs matter, but they are not enough. (2) Life (presently and eternally) will be more enjoyable for all if we act in accordance with God's will. (3) We are to "keep our side of the street clean" and dispense with judging others. Matthew puts it thusly: "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment

you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get” (Matt 7:1–2). One of my favorite poets, Kilian McDonnell, in his poem “Things I Dread,” lists a number of scary thoughts (such as, “Before the end the road just stops”), and concludes with these words:

To be honest, all these I can manage,  
though it is one damn bother.  
But the ultimate terror: I will be measured  
with the measure I measured out.<sup>4</sup>

It is, I think, counterproductive for Christians to imagine celebrating gleefully from the heavenly heights of postmortem existence as they watch their enemies suffer in eternal agony. Such is a dangerous game that deforms rather than transforms one spiritually.

*Eschatological:* Heaven and hell are eschatological symbols. The metaphor of hell is not tied to little personal vendettas, and heaven is not a cosmic spa retreat. The poetry of heaven and hell is much grander than that. It helps us to ask this difficult but essential question: “To what end judgment?” The Bible dreams big on this count: it imagines that you and I and our communities are actors in a drama that began long before we arrived and will persist long after no memory of us remains among the peoples. What we do now matters in an ultimate way.

#### *Restorative vs. Retributive Justice*

Traditionally and typically, human beings love retributive justice—“an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” It makes sense to us. You reap what you sow; the punishment must fit the crime. Retributive justice is interested in the past, in “paying back” and “getting revenge.” It is powerful, it is popular, it is “common sense”; but it obstructs the gospel. It overturns God’s decree as stated by Paul:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom 12:17–21)

Matthew, too, has a different notion of justice than that of most of the world:

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well.... You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on

<sup>4</sup>Kilian McDonnell, *Swift, Lord, You Are Not* (Collegeville, MN: St. John’s University Press, 2003) 33.

the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matt 5:38–40, 43–48)

Why is this way “perfect” (or, better translated, “mature”)? Because it is restorative, not retributive. How can a God who demands that we love our enemies simultaneously commit to casting our enemies into everlasting hellfire? It makes no sense at all from the divine perspective. Retributive justice sets into motion an unending cycle of violence that leads nowhere, literally. That is, it is backwards-oriented.

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Consider the “restorative justice” movement that is sweeping America’s prison systems. In this approach, the aim is to rehabilitate the person who has committed a crime back into society. Most victims of crimes, as it turns out, do not just want to see the perpetrator punished; they want the person to understand the consequences of their actions, to feel remorse, to repent, and make amends of some kind. The same urge drove the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. The victims want the perpetrators to understand and regret the pain they have caused. In her powerful new book, *Razing Hell*, Sharon Baker depicts a character named Otto who has wounded many. She sets a scene, Otto’s judgment day, where Otto and his victims encounter one another. In that scene, Otto experiences God’s judgment as a purifying, consuming fire that burns away anything that was evil in Otto’s life. As part of the painful judgment process, Otto places his hands on the hearts of his victims and instantly feels the full force of their woundedness. Likewise, the victims are able to place their hands on Otto’s heart and feel the pain and darkness inside of him that led him to such terrible acts. The process is painful, sad, and truth-bearing, and it is, in that sense, the experience of hell for Otto.<sup>5</sup>

The example of Otto raises a number of important points. For those who worry that there are no consequences for injustice, a notion of hell does remain. But it is a pedagogically useful hell, aimed at teaching the sinner and moving him or her to repentance and union with God. It is temporary. Its purpose, like everything in God’s plan, is to unite the creature with the Creator in perfect union. Only such a notion of hell is truly commensurate with the God of the Bible, the very God of whom Paul writes: “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Second, the story raises the issue of proportion-

<sup>5</sup>Sharon L. Baker, *Razing Hell: Rethinking Everything You’ve Been Taught about God’s Wrath and Judgment* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010) 115–117.

ality. That is, what human crime is actually worthy of an eternity of damnation? It is a question of justice. Third, the example of Otto reminds us that human beings see only from their own perspective, through a glass darkly, as it were. A fourth element of Baker's story raises the question of the timing of judgment. Traditionally, Christians speak of judgment day, which will occur at the second coming of Christ. On the other hand, many Christians talk of a postmortem judgment that happens to an individual immediately after their individual death. In Baker's story, timing is not the issue, but justice is.<sup>6</sup>

#### UNIVERSAL SALVATION OR ANNIHILATION?

The subject of heaven, hell, and postmortem existence usually elicits a conversation about the possibility of universal salvation, that is, the idea that God will save everyone. Certainly universal salvation is one trajectory within Christianity from its very beginnings. Some find evidence for it in both Paul and John. Some of the earliest church fathers were also proponents of universal salvation.<sup>7</sup> Others, like Sharon Baker, argue for annihilation. That is, she does not countenance a notion of eternal hell, but she does hold out the (unlikely) possibility that someone like Otto, enduring the ordeal of fiery postmortem judgment, may turn out to have nothing good left in him that remains after the purification process. In that case, all would be burned up in the fire that is God and that person would cease to exist altogether. Baker cannot imagine this to be true of any particular person, but her commitment to humanity's ultimate freedom to choose or reject God (even after death) demands this logical necessity.

#### *To Be Christian*

In my book *Death and the Afterlife in the New Testament*, I argue that beliefs concerning death and afterlife function to accomplish certain aims, including political, pastoral, psychological, liturgical, ethical, apologetic, theological, and social ones. Certainly this can be said of the concepts of heaven and hell.

The promise of heaven and prospect of hell may cause some to behave more ethically than they might otherwise. As the saying goes, "The fear of hell peoples heaven." But I must admit that I find it depressing when mature Christians say to me: "If there's no eternal hell, why be moral?" Do grown-ups really do the right thing in order to gain a cosmic gold star or new toy, on the one hand, or avoid getting eternally grounded on the other? Don't we do the right thing because it aligns with God's will, vision, and hopes? Do we really need more than that to motivate us? If so, we may need to read Fowler's *Stages of Faith* and decide to grow up.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup>For treatments of heaven and hell in popular fiction that in some ways parallel Baker's perspective, see William P. Young, *The Shack* (Los Angeles: Windblown, 2007), and Mitch Albom, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* (New York: Hyperion, 2003).

<sup>7</sup>For more on this, see Philip Gulley and James Mulholland, *If Grace is True: Why God Will Save Every Person* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003).

<sup>8</sup>James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: Harper Collins, 1981).

The language of heaven and hell reminds us that we are part of God's grand scheme. Our lives are eschatologically oriented. God takes our lives and our actions and our relationships seriously enough to consider them and give us feedback—feedback that will help us to grab hold of eternal life, here and now and forever. Talk of afterlife, of heaven and hell, reminds us to number our days, to remember that the grass withers and the flower fades, to answer boldly, honestly, and intentionally the question poet Mary Oliver puts to us:

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?<sup>9</sup>

Choose well. ⊕

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<sup>9</sup>Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day," in *New and Selected Poems* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1992) 94.