

HEAVEN AND HELL



Jesus told his disciples that a time would come when all persons would stand before God and be judged. (Matthew 25: 31-46) Those persons who God declares to be righteous will be granted the gift of eternal life and will dwell with God and Christ in Heaven. Those who are found by God to be unrighteous will be condemned to Hell.

What are Heaven and Hell Like?

Christian literature generally depicts Heaven as an expansive realm, an imperial city, the holy dwelling place of God. Pearl-encrusted gates guard the entrance and the streets are paved with gold. Conversely, Hell is commonly painted as a dark, hot, smoke-filled pit. Misery abounds in this place where devils torture the lost souls condemned to spend eternity in its depths.

The Bible often describes Heaven and Hell in physical terms. In Revelation, the Apostle John relates a vision he had of Heaven. It was a place of incredible beauty. The throne room of God shimmered like precious jewels. (Revelation 4: 1-6) Jesus promised his disciples that there were many rooms in his Father's house in Heaven and that he would prepare a place for them when he returned to Heaven so that they would be with him forever. (John 14:2-3)

When Jesus spoke of Hell he usually used the Hebrew word "Gehenna". Gehenna was the valley of Hinnon near Jerusalem. It was used as a garbage dump by local inhabitants. Fires constantly burned there and it had come over time to be regarded as a place where the condemned spirits of unrighteous people resided. Jesus used the term "Gehenna" when he spoke about God's judgment of the wicked. (Matthew 5:22)

When we think of Heaven and Hell in predominately physical terms, we obscure the fact that Heaven and Hell are essentially spiritual realms. They do not necessarily have a physical existence in the same way we experience life on earth. The scriptural references that liken Heaven and Hell to things we know on earth are not so much physical descriptions as they are attempts to explain to earth-bound people the joy of the human soul in the presence of perfect good which is God (Heaven) and the unmitigated despair that prevails in the absence of God (Hell).

Through the lifestyles we choose, we can experience the joy of Heaven and the torment of Hell while we are still in this world. When we are in a proper relationship with God - when we worship God, communicate with God through prayer, and obey God's commandments - we are filled with a peace that surpasses earthly understanding. But when we are at odds with God - when we sin without remorse and neglect our obligations to God and our neighbors - our consciences convict us of our disobedience and we sense that we are distant from God. The real torment of Hell may consist not of fire and unrelenting thirst; but rather of everlasting pain burning in an unrepentant conscience.

What Determines Whether We Experience Heaven or Hell?

Humankind is by nature sinful. If God were to judge us on the basis of our deeds, not one of us would be declared righteous. God does not desire to condemn anyone to Hell. Through the Holy Scripture God declares, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn...and live." (Ezekiel 18: 23, 32) However, God does not overlook deliberate disobedience and unrepented sin.

Our only hope of salvation is Jesus Christ, God's gift of love to a sinful world. We can, by God's grace through baptism by water and the Holy Spirit, enter into a saving relationship with Jesus. This is the beginning of a new life of discipleship **under** the Word (God's will as revealed by Scripture) and **within** the realm of God's grace. On the other hand, we can reject God's gift of salvation and pursue a life of self-centered disobedience. One choice accepts by grace the gift of an eternal relationship with our Creator/Redeemer; the other rejects the gift and results in separation from God.

It is a misconception that we can work our way to Heaven. God's gift, not our deeds, determines our destinies. The Apostle John wrote, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

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