

Introduction: Heaven and Hell

Few things could be more important than what happens to us when this life ends. Most people believe the Bible teaches that we will go to either heaven or hell at death. They might be surprised at what it really says!

Most religions and religious organizations, including most Christian denominations, teach that good people go to some sort of paradise, usually heaven, after they die. Heaven is typically characterized as a place of unsurpassable happiness—the ultimate paradise. It is commonly taught and believed that all who go there will live joyfully forever.

Yet despite what a wonderful place it's supposed to be, it seems no one is in a hurry to go there.

Widespread belief in death as the gateway to heaven does not change the fact that most people view death as something to be avoided at all costs. Through medical science we usually do everything we can to prevent death as long as possible.

If people could journey right away to eternal life in heaven by means of some heavenly express, wouldn't we find that almost no one would want to buy a ticket? Wouldn't we find that most people would prefer to continue their present life here on earth? The possibility of immediate residence in heaven doesn't seem to be that appealing. Our actions indicate this is the way most of us think.

An eternity doing what?

Perhaps the reason for the reluctance to enter the hereafter through death is that no one has ever provided us with a truly compelling explanation as to what the righteous would do after arriving in heaven. If we are to spend all eternity there, you would think God would tell us in the Bible what we should expect once we arrive. Will we spend our time plucking harps? Will we sit and simply gaze upon God forever and ever? These are both popular conceptions of heaven, but most people can't imagine doing either for eternity. Eternity is, after all, a long time!

Maybe we should ask ourselves a straightforward question: Do these common concepts even come from the Bible?

Many people who expect to go to heaven admit they can find little in the Scriptures about what they have to look forward to once they get there. British historian and author Paul Johnson put it this way: "Heaven... lacks genuine incentive. Indeed, it lacks definition of any kind. It is the great hole in theology" (*The Quest for God*, 1996, p. 173). If heaven is the goal God has set for His servants, why has He revealed so little about it in His Word?

There is a simple reason we encounter a vacuum when we look in the Bible for what the "saved"—those who are spared some sort of eternal punishment—will do in heaven. *The Bible does not say the righteous will dwell in heaven as their reward*. As we will see, the Bible reveals that God has *something else* in mind—something far different and far superior to most people's concepts about heaven!

Troubling questions about hell

But confusion about heaven isn't the only problem we run into when we consider popular views of life after death. What about the *un* righteous, those who don't measure up? What happens to *them*?

Many who profess Christianity believe the wicked will burn forever in hell. They sincerely believe this is what the Bible teaches.

But we need to ask a simple question: Would a merciful and loving God inflict excruciating torment on human beings for trillions upon trillions of years—throughout all eternity without end? Could the great Creator God of the universe be so unfeeling and uncaring?

The Bible indeed says that God "has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness" (Acts:17:31). At that time those who have repented and accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior will be given eternal life. "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts:4:12, New International Version).

But what will happen in that day to the hapless people who have never even heard or been exposed to that name? Will they be cast shrieking into hellfire along with those who knowingly hate and despise God?

Only a minority of the earth's population lays claim to being Christian. Those who profess Christianity total only about a third of the world's population. Vast numbers of the other two thirds have never had the opportunity to genuinely repent and accept Christ simply because of *where* they live. Millions more through the centuries likewise never had the opportunity because of *when* they lived. Would it be just and right for God to subject them to the same punishment He will give to those who willfully reject Him and choose to make themselves His enemies?

These questions are neither trivial nor hypothetical. They affect the overwhelming majority of all people who have ever lived. When carried to their conclusions, the traditional answers have sobering implications about the character, nature and judgment of the God Christians claim to worship.

We need to face these questions squarely and honestly. Isn't it time we examined the truth of what the Bible teaches about heaven and hell?

Join us on a journey through the pages of history and your Bible as we explore these questions. You may find the answers quite surprising!