

## Heaven and Hell; A Rational Perspective

There are two major reasons why people reject organized religion in the US. The most significant stumbling block to faith is a failure to understand how a loving God could allow suffering and evil to occur in the world. I address this in a separate article which you can link to at [Inclusivechristianity.org](http://Inclusivechristianity.org). The second most significant stumbling block lies in the Christian doctrine of heaven and hell. A traditional understanding of heaven and hell leads one to conclude that two thirds of the world's population, or approximately 4 billion people, will spend an eternity in conscious torment simply because they don't believe the correct things about Jesus, or more specifically that Jesus died on the cross as a payment for their sins. In this traditional understanding, how one lives their life is, for the most part, irrelevant. You might be the most loving, compassionate, forgiving, generous individual in the world, who spends your life serving others, and yet if you practice the wrong religion, or even worse no religion at all, you will be condemned to hell.

I can't believe in a God that would condemn people to hell, however you may envision hell, simply for being raised in the "wrong" religion. Fortunately, from my perspective, that is not the image of God that Jesus teaches us, or models for us in his actions. The image of God that Jesus portrays is that of the father in his parable of "The Lost Son", also referred to as the "Prodigal Son." In this story, the father has perpetual and unconditional love for his wayward son. His love for this son is heaped upon the boy as soon as he returns to the father. No confession is necessary; no statement of belief required. All that is required is the son turning to his father and once again wishing to live in accordance with his father's will. That is a God in which I can believe.

Any discussion of heaven and hell must begin with the realization that like most theological concepts, the doctrine of heaven and hell did not emerge overnight. It was not beamed down by God to the church overnight, but rather evolved over time under the influence of many people. The way in which theologians have imagined heaven and hell has varied throughout time. One of our early church fathers, Origen, promoted the idea of Universalism. This inclusive theological perspective proposed that God's eventual triumph over evil will lead to everyone's eventual reconciliation with God. On the other hand, medieval theologians tended to favor and promote an eternally punishing version of hell. What we can say for sure is that the images people hold today are very different than those written about in both the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and New Testament. Jesus himself doesn't say much about heaven. He refers to his father in heaven, with the implication that heaven is a place or realm distinct from Earth, but little else is said. There are images of heaven portrayed in Revelation and other Christian apocalyptic (end of the world when God makes everything right) literature but these images are meant to be metaphorical and symbolic not literal portrayals of heaven. Jesus himself was primarily focused on "the kingdom of God." Often we confuse this with our concept of heaven because the kingdom of God is referred to as the kingdom of heaven throughout the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience to whom the name of God is sacred (i.e. not to be pronounced) so the writer refers to "the kingdom of God" as "the kingdom of heaven". In either case Jesus is referring to the reign of God, in other words, what the world would look like if God reigned instead of Caesar, or other worldly figures.

He teaches us through his Sermon on the Mount, with its revolutionary Beatitudes, and through parables, what this would look like. He is teaching us how God would have us live in connectedness with each other if he reigned in our hearts. Among other things this "kingdom" living would be loving, compassionate, forgiving, merciful, humble, meek, and generous. There would be a more egalitarian distribution of material goods, and people would look for ways to serve others instead of looking for ways for people to serve them.

The word interpreted as "hell" in the Gospels generally emerges from one of two concepts, neither of which have much to do with most people's images of hell, which derive from literature such as Dante's *Inferno*, or the very symbolic book of Revelation (as well as other ancient apocalyptic literature). One of the Hebrew words used by Jesus in the Gospels, which is later translated as "hell", is *Sheol*, the Hebrew designation for the underworld, the place where basically everyone went when they died, whether they were good or bad. The Greek parallel for *Sheol* is *Hades*, the word that appears in Greek translations. The concept of *Hades* (or *Sheol*) containing separate divisions for the wicked and righteous (as seen in the parable of The Rich Man and Lazarus, Luke 16:19-31) is a later development, influenced by Greco-Roman mythology and philosophy. In other cases where we hear Jesus referring to hell, the word is *Gehenna*. *Gehenna* refers to the Valley of Hinnom, a valley on the south and west side of Jerusalem that was the city dump. This valley had a rather notorious history. The site was initially where apostate Israelites and followers of various Ba'al and Caananite gods sacrificed their children by fire. At the time of Jesus people tossed their garbage and waste into this valley which perpetually burned. Corpses of criminals were thrown into this burning dump. When we hear Jesus refer to *Gehenna* (hell), it appears that he is using this dump as a metaphorical device to indicate the torment one experiences when he or she persistently lives their life contrary to the will of God. Jesus, who used hyperbole (great exaggeration) frequently to drive home his messages, could think of no worse place for people to imagine themselves, literally or figuratively. It is also important to understand that when Jesus talks about people ending up in *Gehenna* (which we will now think of as a state of torment rather than a specific place), it has nothing to do with them believing in the wrong doctrine or participating in the wrong religion. It has everything to do with how people conduct themselves, especially how they conduct themselves in reference to those around them who are in need.

It is interesting that the earliest handbook for first century Christians, the *Didache*, doesn't focus on believing specific things about the divinity of Jesus or his atonement for our sins on the cross. Almost the entire focus of the book is on instructing people how to live with one another as Jesus taught. The largest section of the book gives instruction on the difference between living "the way of life" in contrast to "the way of death." From the perspective of this early Christian instruction manual, one's salvation is obtained through living a life in connectedness with God and each other, following the path that Jesus taught. This is what brings eternal life.

It is worth spending some time analyzing the word "eternal" since it is applied to both the ultimate Christian prize, "eternal life" and the ultimate penalty, "eternal punishment." The word "eternal" is an English word that poorly reflects the intent of either the Hebrew or Greek words that are actually used in scripture. Somehow, the Hebrew word *olam* and the Greek word *aion* were translated into English as

*eternal, or everlasting. Olam and aion* our best translated as *age* or *ages*. Strictly speaking, "eternal life" would be better translated "life of the ages." Very importantly, use of these words did not connote endlessness or infinity, which is how we interpret them. "Eternal life" (*aiōnios*) referred to an age of undefined duration, but nevertheless a period of time that has a beginning and an end. An alternate way of interpreting "eternal life" is that it suggests a life that exceeds anything that a person has previously experienced. In this context it is referring to a quality of life, not a duration of time. It is important to recognize that an apocalyptic mentality prevailed during Jesus' lifetime. Sure, life was nearly intolerable under the repression of the Romans (and before that the Greeks, Persians, Babylonians, and Assyrians) but God would enter the world at some point and set things right. People following Jesus thought that Jesus was the beginning of this process, ushering in the kingdom of God. In asking Jesus what they must do to earn eternal life, people were not asking Jesus what they must do to live forever and ever in the hereafter. In all likelihood, they were mainly interested in what they must do to be a part of this coming kingdom, or coming age (*olam* or *aion*) to be in good standing with God.

Now let's look at the concept of "eternal punishment." It is noteworthy that out of 150 instances in which the word "eternal" is used in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Bible), 4/5 of the time there is a distinct implication of limited duration. It is analogous to when I exclaim, "It took forever to get to your house!" Or maybe, "It took an eternity to get to your house!" In using the words "forever" and "eternity", I don't really mean that it took an infinite period of time, just a long period of time. Why is this important? Well, a key component of many people's image of hell is that people will be separated from God forever. Their image is a God who is punishing people for eternity, without any end in sight. Their concept of God's judgment is one of retributive justice, God getting back at evil people for their misdeeds. People who live a good life (as they define it, conveniently forgetting that we all commonly live our life in ways that are contrary to God's will) favor this image of judgment because they feel that sooner or later they are being rewarded for their good behavior, while others are forever punished. However, this is inconsistent with our image of God as a God of grace, one who loves us unconditionally and accepts us whenever we decide to return to him. A God of grace does not judge as a first step toward punishment, but rather judges as a first step toward reconciliation. In this model, judgment is necessary in order to show us how we are living in ways that are contrary to God's intent, ways that are dysfunctional and destructive, ways that lead us into separation from each other and God. The eternal hope is that at some point one will accept God into their heart and attempt to live in accordance with his way, the path taught by Jesus. In this model, phrases such as "eternal punishment" or the concept of "going to hell" do not represent an eternity of conscious torment but rather in undefined period of time, or an undefined *olam* or *aion*, in which we are separated from God by our rejection of him and his way. By the very nature of his grace, we are able to return to him and immediately be reconciled (as the wayward son was in The Lost Son parable) whenever we choose to do so, here or in the hereafter, whatever that may be.

From the perspective I have presented, you can see that it is not particularly useful to think of heaven and hell as specific places. We know what is above the sky and below the Earth's surface. It is certainly time to reject ancient portraits of pearly gates in the clouds and realms of hell below the earth. I don't discount the possibility of there being other realms or dimensions. In fact, our physicist friends

periodically postulate dimensions beyond our comprehension. I just don't think it is particularly helpful to envision heaven and hell in that way. I would simply define heaven as the state of being in connectedness with God and hell as being separate from God. In other words, we choose to create our own heaven or hell, here and hereafter, by choosing or rejecting God's way of life. Jesus showed us the path to God. Believing in Jesus does not mean believing certain things about Jesus or his crucifixion. When we believe in someone, we believe what that person teaches us. We model our behavior after that person, trying to emulate them. Proclamations of faith are cheap, and by themselves do nothing to transform us, to bring us closer to God. Our salvation, or close and abiding relationship with God, emerges from how strongly we commit to love over hatred, compassion over selfishness, forgiveness over judgment, generosity over greed, and servitude over power. These are the central components of the path to heaven taught by Jesus. Whether Christians want to accept it or not, it is also the path taught by the Jewish prophets, Mohammed, the Hindu mystics, and Buddha. God in his infinite wisdom and extravagant love for all of humanity has shown throughout history, over and over again, through many different messengers, how we all can be in relationship with him and each other in the way that he intended. The only question remaining is..... Are we listening?