

## **Heaven and Hell: Myth, Fable or Eternal Destiny?**

**Introduction:** What question is more vital than “Where will I spend eternity?” Even if ignored, this issue will force its way into our thinking one way or another.

### **1. The Fear of Hell**

A. Summary of modern views: “In increasingly secular American culture ... ‘hell has become about as politically incorrect a concept as one can find’ ... Indeed, the 20<sup>th</sup> century was nearly the death of hell. Lampooned by modern intellectuals and increasingly sidelined by preachers preferring to dwell on more uplifting themes, the threat of post-mortem punishment of the impenitent in an eternal lake of fire all but disappeared from the religious mainstream by the 1960s ... And while polls showed that the majority of Americans professed to believe in hell’s existence, almost no one thought he would go there ... ‘hell has disappeared and no one noticed’” (USN&WR, 1/31/00).

1. Naturalists deny hell in their denial of all things supernatural/spiritual.
2. Religionists deny hell in their erroneous view of God: “A God of love and mercy would never subject His creatures to eternal torment.” This leads to two basic notions: a) God is going to save everyone, b) God will simply annihilate the guilty.
3. If the living have no soul, and if the dead have no existence, and if hell is a primitive, oppressive superstition, then “*Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die*” (1 Cor 15:32). What a trade! In order to escape moral responsibility men accept existence with no ultimate meaning, purpose or destination.

B. The New Testament, particularly Jesus Himself, deliberately paints a graphic picture of a place we do not want to be. *Jesus uses the phrase “gehenna” 11 of the 12 times it is found in the gospels. **He believed in hell!***

1. Hell is described as a place of eternal fire: “*Where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched*” (Mk 9:44, 46, 48); “*cast into the everlasting fire ... cast into hell fire*” (Mt 18:8-9). Much ado was made about the Pope’s recent comments about hell not being literal fire. Whether it is or isn’t literal fire is not the issue: Jesus assures excruciating torment in whatever form for the wicked.
2. Hell is described as a place of suffering: “... *send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame*” (Lk

16:24); *“There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”* (Mt 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; Lk 13:28).

3. Hell is described as a place of darkness, an interesting contrast between burning fire but absence of light: *“... will be cast into outer darkness”* (Mt 8:12; 22:13; 25:30); *“to whom the blackness of darkness is reserved forever”* (Jude 13).

C. The fire of hell is tied to the outpouring of God’s wrath: *“in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God ...”* (2 Th 1:8); *“suffering the vengeance of eternal fire”* (Jude 7); *“a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries”* (Heb 10:27). (See also on God’s wrath: Jn 3:36; Rom 1:18; 2:5, 8-9; Eph 5:6; Col 3:6).

## **2. The Hope of Heaven**

A. Fear alone is a poor motivator; it is easily suppressed or forgotten. Consequently, God further motivates us regarding our eternal future by offering us a desirable alternative.

B. Description of heaven (not a *geographical* picture but quality of existence):

1. Fellowship with the Father/Creator: *“And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent”* (Jn 17:3); *“And thus we shall always be with the Lord”* (1 Th 4:17); *“For God did not appoint us to wrath, but ... that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him”* (1 Th 5:10).

2. Sharing divine glory: *“When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory”* (Col 3:4); *“... that you would have a walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory”* (1 Th 2:12); *“... to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord”* (2 Th 2:14).

3. Eternal life: *“... whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”* (Jn 3:16); *“... eternal life to those who ... seek for glory, honor, and immortality ... glory, honor, and peace”* (Rom 2:6-10).

C. Heaven or Hell: A “no-brainer.” People play lotteries, enter sweepstakes, become game show contestants in the hope of winning money. They spend millions of dollars to keep their bodies in good health. They buy insurance policies in case of disaster to auto/home. *Why are so many disinterested in heaven??*

1. *“But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ ... should shine on them”* (2 Cor 4:4).

2. God wants us to believe in Him, think about heaven and want to be with Him. But Satan doesn't want us to think about him at all. He doesn't care if we want to be with him or not; in fact, *he doesn't want us thinking too much, period!*
3. We must work to keep heaven and eternal life clearly in our minds. It is worth every sacrifice, every effort, every disappointment, every challenge that we have to endure to get there.

### 3. Looking Ahead by Looking Within

- A. We all know why we do not want to be in hell, but have you clearly defined in your mind why you **do** want to be in heaven? If assembling with the saints is subject to constant deliberation, if prayer is merely a pre-meal ritual, if singing is a chore, if the preaching is always too long (and boring) – in short, if being a Christian is a barely tolerable experience, *what makes us think we would enjoy being in heaven?!*
- B. What joy and accomplishment to say with Paul: *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, **and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing**”* (2 Tim 4:7-8).
- C. **Illus:** My father was in the South Pacific for a year. We had communication with him; we received gifts and presents from him; we knew he existed and loved us – *but we wanted to be with him!* When he returned, how we “loved his appearing!”

**Conclusion:** *“Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them”* (Heb 11:16). If God is not ashamed of us, shall we be ashamed of Him? Let's journey toward that city *“whose builder and maker is God”* (Heb 11:10).