

What do we mean when we say heaven and hell?

Mark 4:12-13, 17-18

August 25, 2024

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¹²Now when Jesus^[a] heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea...

¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”^[b]

If you've lived in Georgia, or anywhere in the south long enough, you've probably driven past this billboard.

IMAGE – Heaven & Hell Billboard

There are several different variations on this billboard, including this one.

IMAGE – Heaven & Ohio

As someone who grew up in Ohio, I want to say this is completely unfair. Ohio is only like the 1st or 2nd circle.

For a lot longer than any of us have been around, parts of the Christian tradition have taught an idea of a bifurcated afterlife: when we die, we will go to one of two places.

IMAGE - heaven

Either a place in the clouds with angels and harps, for people who believe in the saving power of Jesus and/or were very good...

IMAGE - hell

...or the place for people who reject the saving power of Jesus and/or were very bad...

When this is your theological view of the afterlife, as it is for some Christians, it shapes everything about your religion. And it should! If you think this is the fate that even *one* of us might be headed for, every word out of your mouth must ensure that as many people as possible end up in the “good place” and not the “bad one.”

But what the Bible doesn't paint this picture of life after death? What if the Biblical testimony about heaven and hell is wide-ranging and evolving, and what if the prevailing message is different than what the billboard says? What difference would it make in the life of faith? Let's talk for a few minutes about what the Bible says about heaven and hell and how we make sense of it today.

When I was a kid, I paid attention in school. I remember seeing diagrams in textbooks like this one... **IMAGE of layers of atmosphere...** and this one... **IMAGE of layers of earth**

These diagrams are a problem for a studious young person who goes to church. Where, exactly, is “heaven” and where is “hell?” Cause heaven ain't up and hell ain't down. If they

don't exist as spatial realities, what are they? Are they metaphors? Are they states of being? Curious young people want to know.

What we have come to know as "hell" is an amalgamation of a few different things in the Scriptures. The Jewish tradition talks about a place called "Sheol." Sheol is "the place of the dead." It is depicted in the Old Testament as a dark, lower world where the dead linger as shadows of our former selves, cut off from the living, and cut off from God. It's like "Hades" in Greek mythology. In the references to Sheol, all of us end up there when we die, whether we were good or bad. Sheol is the place of the dead, and a metaphor for our common destination: the grave

It's not until the 2nd Temple period—300BCE until 70CE—when hell in Jewish life evolves into something more like its current form. Hell gets a new name—Gehenna. Gehenna is a place name—the Valley of Hinnom, a ravine south of Jerusalem, where legend says that fiery human sacrifices were offered under Judah's bad kings. That site became forever cursed. Gehenna was known as a place of fire, divine judgment, and destruction. Matthew talks about it in his gospel as "the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt 25:41).

Hell is never a consistent or coherent idea in Scripture. Our ancestors pondered the reality of death and the possibility of punishment, but hell is never a main idea. And when some idea of hell is mentioned, another thing becomes clear: the Scriptures consistently proclaim that God defeats any power that hell might have. Hell is a kind of opposition to God—whether that hell is conceived of as eternal consequences for a selfish life, or a this-worldly pain that we inflict on each other. But the Scriptures are clear: hell's power, hell's hold on us, is no match for God. You with me so far?

What about heaven? What does the Bible say about heaven? Like hell, the Hebrew Bible doesn't have anything like a vision of heaven as a cloudy destination for the good people. In the Hebrew scriptures, Heaven is simply the realm of Divine activity—one that is inaccessible to us mortals. It's in the 2nd Temple period again that Jewish teaching about heaven begins to incorporate Greek ideas like the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the dead. New Testament writers weave these new ideas about heaven into their understanding of what Jesus' life, death, and resurrection meant.

As they do, an interesting picture of heaven emerges in the New Testament—but it's not what we traditionally think of. We've been taught to think that what happens is that when we die, we are transported via resurrection from the earth into the heavens—sort of a Star Trek, "beam me up, Scotty." We are transported from this world into heaven, this otherwise inaccessible realm of God. But that's not *actually* what the Scriptures say. Instead, the prevailing image in the New Testament is of *the heavens coming to earth*. Again and again, Jesus says "the Kingdom of God is at hand." In Matthew, it's the Kingdom of Heaven. This heavenly empire comes to us. It breaks in here. Like the great Belinda Carlisle sang, "ooh,

heaven is a place on earth.” Or better yet, the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Think of heaven this way: “heaven is God’s future, coming toward us.” Oh my gosh, Lewicki, what on earth does that mean? Heaven is not a place—it is the reality that God intends for all of Creation. Heaven this New Creation, the world of God’s design, in which every tear is wiped away and mourning and pain and crying are no more. Heaven is the whole people of God, the saints of every age, living in harmony with God one another and with the Creation itself. The Biblical testimony about heaven says is that our future is not defined by the unfolding of what is contained by present reality. Heaven, our faith says, is the invisible unimpeded dominion of love and freedom that overwhelms the powers of the present age.

What does it mean to “believe” in the Biblical testimony about heaven? This is what it means to me, and I what I offer that it might mean to you.

It means that we are willing to believe that God’s love, justice, and freedom are always breaking in and disrupting and overwhelming the powers of our age.

Believing in heaven means that as you get acquainted with Jesus, we become “citizens of heaven.” We align our life with this in-breaking movement of love and justice, of mercy and compassion.

To believe in heaven is to say that the ‘real world’ is one in which the life and love that comes from God is always, everywhere, and in every moment, stronger than any threat, including death.

To believe in heaven is to trust that when we die, we are gathered up by the Great Love into the communion of the saints, and that in the New Creation that God is making, all of the saints of God will live with one another in peace.

Heaven is not about where we go—it’s about whether God is coming to us.

There is a word in German, *fernweh*, which means “farsickness.” It’s an aching, a longing for a place that we’ve never been. It’s a word that captures how I feel about heaven. This world, as sweet as it can be, is not the one that God intends for us. There is a holy longing inside of each of us that envisions a world of unimpeded love, freedom, and justice. This holy longing is a reservoir of hope; this longing for the coming heaven is a safe harbor in the storm of life; this longing can also draw us into new patterns for creative living that *bring life* to ourselves and others, in the face of the death-dealing forces of this world.

Do I believe in heaven? You bet your life I do.