

# Heaven and Hell

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] I think today we live in a society that has lost a Christian worldview, particularly here in the consumerist first world. We've lost that sense of knowledge, of biblical truth and biblical thinking so that in the media and in education, in commerce, in politics, and in entertainment, it's really about the here and now. It's about enjoying life today.

It's about getting as much as we can from this life, living for today, being young, enjoying pleasure. And that's a broad generalisation. But that is very much the thinking and the driven kind of thinking of society in which we live. And in other words, the destination is now. The destination is today. It's getting the most out of the life that we live today and not thinking about what might happen tomorrow. We can live in debt. We can live and think about the future of paying off debt as long as we enjoy life today and as long as we have friends and things are good and we're happy. That is very much what we are tempted to be thinking about. And the trouble is when we do that, and we're tempted to do that I think as Christians as well a lot of the time, we're not accounting for God in our lives. We're not remembering that he is the source of life so that from God emanates life. And we were created for him, created to be in a relationship with him. And because of that, because God is life and because God exists and God lives and because he is eternal, then we need to think beyond about today being a destination. And we need to think about kind of more important things as it were. And take God, as I mentioned this morning about the Bible, really dealing very often with the big things, then there's nothing bigger than heaven and hell and destinations at one level. You see I would much rather to be perfectly honest. At the graveside of a friend, I don't want a scientist, I don't want a DJ and I don't want a holiday rep.

I want God. I want someone that will speak to and deal with these matters. Matters that affect me and matters that I'll be dealing with before too long. And so it's tremendously important that we don't forget our final destination and forget the fact that there is a destination.

It's important that we don't shrink God into something very small and very manageable and ignore him. And at this point, and I say especially to you as young people, that you don't make the wrong choices because you have taken God out of the equation. At this important stage of your lives that, and as we get older, as we get into middle age, we can often be prone to make the wrong decisions because we lose perspective and we take God out of the equation.

And he doesn't want us to take him out of the equation because he is so significant and so important. And so for a little while tonight, I want to talk about heaven and hell. I don't think we talk about it enough, future final destinations. I don't speak about it enough.

[ 3 : 3 6 ] I probably don't preach from it enough. But it's a hugely significant part of the Bible. The whole Bible moves towards this end that speaks in Revelation that prophesies, that moves forward and speaks about it. More particularly heaven, but also hell.

Now obviously in a short time that we're together, I'm not going to speak in any way that will be exhaustive, couldn't anyway even have had the time. But I'll also try, while not being exhaustive, I'll try not to be speculative because we can speculate a lot about these future subjects. The Bible doesn't say terribly much, but it tells us certain things. But I don't want to spend the time speculating about the kind of things we might be doing in heaven or the kind of things that might happen in hell that are speculative and that aren't really revealed to us. And I want to speak about heaven and hell primarily in relational terms. So in other words, I'm not really talking about destination in terms of a place. While both are places, heaven and hell, literal real places, I don't want to talk in that kind of term as much as in relational terms, what it means relationally for us in our future.

Because if God is eternal and if God is the giver, the author, the sustainer of life, your life and my life tonight, if he is love and the sustenance of this world and the source of this world and if he is eternal, then eternity is what I'm saying. Relationally is either with him or without him. That's what I'm trying to say in terms of speaking about relationally.

It's either with God in a loving relationship or it's not with God, it's away from God in a relationship of judgment. God is key, therefore, to what we're saying tonight and to our understanding of the future. And we can reference that here and now, can't we?

We often think about heaven and hell as the future, far away, something maybe that we can put out of our mind because, you know, we're young, we've got lots of things to do, there's lots of things in our lives, or just that we just can't deal with. But we can reference it here and now because the gospel is already about being rescued by God from our sins into a relationship with God. So we begin to experience heaven now as Christians because we have a relationship with Jesus Christ. Gospel is rescue from death into life, from hellishness into a heavenliness that is the beginning of birth bangs of the future.

[ 6 : 33 ] The gospel is about beginning to enjoy that relationship with God that's in the separators from having. And that is, my friends, the essence of heaven and hell. That's the essence as we allow it to develop and move forward under in Scripture. We see the final destinations of knowing or not knowing the Lord Jesus Christ and God through him. So that heaven is one to begin by coming to faith in Jesus Christ now and beginning to experience the kingdom of heaven now with all the battles, with all the fact that it's on, we already received but not yet, there's lots of things still to happen. And also there's a hell for us to shun in terms of turning our back on God or not as we talked about this morning, not following God, following our own desires. So heaven, just for a moment, Revelation 21, the first passage that we read together. Now Revelation speaks a lot about heaven in different ways but I just want to focus on that verse 3 which says, I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, now the dwelling of God is with men and he will live with them. They will be his people and God himself will be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. And if you flick back to Revelation 7, 17, it says almost the same thing about the lamb at the centre of the throne, also wiping away the tears of his people. So we have God and Jesus Christ, the lamb as the centre of heaven. That is, if you want a description of heaven, that's what heaven is. That is the essence of heaven, it's the fact that

Jesus Christ is there, God is there and where God is in all his perfect glory, that is what heaven will be in its fullness. His grace and his love and his power, his creativity, his fellowship, his beauty, colour, variety, creativity, artistry, music, vibrance, laughter, all of the good things that God has created that emanates from him, that comes from him, that reflects him, that we taste now even in this world, though it's broken by sin and by our separation from him will be what heaven is. It's to enjoy that recognition of who God is in his nature and his character with his benevolent presence there, his imminent, infinite, interested presence there with us, enjoying this gloriously perfect, good, cool and wholesome life. A kind of perfect, I think at some levels, a perfect kind of nature reserve with God at the centre. You know, it speaks here in another place, Revelation 19, of the river of life and the tree of life that flows through the city and I think that symbolises just the natural blessings and beauty, the nature of heaven as in nature, you know, hills, trees, mountains, that kind of thing, the opulence, the provision, the abundance and that Christ is the centre of that culture and of that worship in heaven.

So it's a place where God himself, the loving presence of God is absolutely central and key to our understanding and experience of heaven. But it's also, more than I think it's a perfect community of God's people. I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of the heaven from God and I think that there's much in scripture that speaks not just of God being at the centre of heaven but of being a great and wonderful, vital, perfect community of people together, not an ind... We don't think and we don't wish for heaven in individualistic terms. It will be me and God together, just him and me. But it will be a community of God's people together. It speaks of it as a home of righteousness, it's just a home of righteousness being reflected in loving God perfectly, of course, but also loving one another. Perfect. Can you imagine? A place, a city, a multitude, a people, a mansion, a home, a marriage feast, all the imagery speaks of community and communality and being together and the fellowship and friendship and laughter and love that's involved in that. A place of open, joyful, loving, developing, growing, fulfilling friendships.

Have you experienced, I'm sure you have, sitting maybe in a rocking chair or a comfy chair, fires on. You've got your best friends with you, maybe your family. You've had a great time, great evening, you're sitting round this fire, you're just talking, fellowshiping, laughing together, you're relaxed, you're talking spiritually as well about things and you just stop for a moment and you think, you know, doesn't get much better than this. Life doesn't get much better than this. For all our desire for money and for fame or whatever else, that moment when we just, with our slippers on. Maybe that's an old man's thing, I say, is it? No, the young people are looking at me, what's he saying? What's he talking about?

But you just, you're there, you're comfortable, you're with your friends and family and you think, this is great, I'm just myself here and Christ is in our presence also. Well, I think heaven's a bit like that and maybe speculating. But there's that kind, I don't know if you love slippers, but there's that kind of just absolute peace and joy and contentment.

[13:18] You're not looking over your shoulder, you're not wanting for anything, you're not coveting anything, you know, it wouldn't end and it's just a perfect glorious community. And that is focused even further in, even in the text here with the absence of something. You know, an evening like that is highlighted by the absence of just bad things. And so heaven is always expressed negatively as well in the absence of tears, you know. There will be no more, God will wipe away every tear, no more death or mourning or crying or pain.

Isn't that great that there's this positive negative that we have here, none of the bad things. The intimate concern of the king who wipes the tears away, you know. It's not that he kind of just says this will happen, he's intimately involved as a fatherly loving figure who's wiped away the tears and he says, I command that in this place there will be no sadness, no more death, no more misery, no more pain, no more suffering, no more separation.

I command this. This is what I say, I wipe away every tear and in his authority and in his glory and in his provision. That is what he's giving to us. That is what heaven is, the absence of all that is bad, the presence of all that is good that we can only begin to imagine here and now beyond our imaginations. But I guarantee everyone of us here and everyone outside there and in the pubs this evening, wherever they are, wherever people are, these are the kind of things even though they wouldn't formulate in these terms that people are looking for. Belonging, the absence of suffering and pain, joyfulness, fellowship, friendship, they maybe wouldn't equate that with God, but God is the author and the giver of all these things and even in our broken and sin-spoiled world we see that seed that everybody wants and longs for that can only be found in Jesus Christ. That's the beginning and the end of the Bible. That's where it started and that's where it focuses even more powerfully in glory.

God made us to be with him. That's what you're made for. You are made for him. I am made for him. Nothing else will satisfy us until we find our rest in him. Evil and temptation and sin is an aberration and an abomination that separates us from life and from fellowship and from friendship, from one another and from God and Christ came to put that right.

So that is just a glimpse and I think generally the Bible only gives us glimpses. We experience tastes of heaven here. We experience fellowship with God. We experience community. We sometimes experience an absence of tears and sometimes somebody close wipes away the tears and it's seems like God's hand and that can sometimes be the greatest thing you could do for someone.

[ 16 : 41 ] It's just wipe away their tears because that's a godly thing to do. That's a god-like thing to do. It's not very dramatic. It won't get you in the front page of any newspaper. It won't get you a bonus in your job. But God sees that and recognises it as an act of grace and compassion and we see, we sense little aspects of heaven here and now but we move towards something far, far more glorious than we can imagine in heaven. But we do also have to speak about the opposite of that. If we're being honest with Scripture, it's great Sunday night, nice warm church, cold and wet outside, just sitting in quiet for a little while speaking about heaven. But we must do justice to destinations and biblical destinations and so I want to look very briefly at Matthew 27, the passage we read there with

Jesus on the cross because the greatest and strongest and clearest description of hell is in Jesus' cry of forsakenness on the cross, my God, my God. Why have you forsaken me?

See we're looking at heaven and hell in relational terms. Heaven being a place with God, with this loving God and hear Jesus in our place on the cross experiencing hell, not after he died, before he died, when the sun wouldn't even look at him, the sun in the sky was darkened because of that moment. He experienced that three hours of hellish God, the Father, forsaken this on the cross in our place and that is the relational aspect that I want to focus on this evening Christ, not only experienced it in a way that is at one level, it's completely unique but at one level it's different from any other I think experience of hell that anyone will have because he was completely innocent because he is God and he can't understand

God's abandonment whereas those in hell will because of his justice. But Christ not only experienced it, he also spoke most of it, spoke most about it, spoke more about it than anyone in the Bible and there are many references to hell in Jesus' teaching. And the relational aspect that I want to focus on is the separation from God, that is key. It's undoubtedly, and I don't begin to pretend to know, the mystery and the cry of Jesus on the cross, but a cry that speaks of abandonment with no sense of God's love and the fathers belonging to the Father and hope from the Father and a complete and utter experience of loneliness, of being alone. Never had Christ experienced that and that was the deepest hell of his experience being alone under God's wrath, taking God's punishment for sin with a complete loss of well-being, separated from the love of the Father, not entirely separated, I don't think anywhere in the universe can be entirely separated, but separated from his love. Gehenna, the word that Jesus uses all the time for hell in the New Testament, I think is significant and he uses it because it was very much in the psyche of the Jewish people that word, because it really stems from the valley of Hinnom, which was outside Jerusalem, which in the Old Testament had become a place of curse and judgment because it was the place where one of the evil deities, Molech in the Old Testament, the God of the Ammonites, was worshiped and he was worshiped by child sacrifice, children were sacrificed to him in the valley of Hinnom and it became a byword for judgment and for darkness and for horror and to avoid a place of ominous fear. In the end became just a rubbish, the burning rubbish heap in Jerusalem, which is why there are so many references linking hell to fire because it was the same

Jewish concept of fire being part of God's judgment and being related to God's judgment and this valley, this Gehenna was just an illustration, that's what it was. You could maybe think of a, maybe there's a similar, you know, people talk about, it was hell on earth and that's really what Jesus was saying about this thing, he was using it as an example, see this is a kind of illustration of hell on earth, now it's an incomplete one obviously, but it helped people to understand it was a place to be avoided at all costs, you didn't take a picnic to the valley of Hinnom, you didn't take a picnic to Gehenna, you didn't go there, it was a place of curse and of judgment and of horror, it was a place people did not go to and that reflects the image that Jesus was very powerfully aware of as he lived in

[ 22 : 50 ] Jerusalem, came to Jerusalem to die and indeed himself was crucified outside the city and that imagery that reflects separation from God and judgment from God and being away from God is reflected in different biblical imagery as well, it doesn't only speak of a place of fire, it speaks of it as a place of outer judgment, you know, sorry, outer darkness, a place away from God who is light, like Eden where Adam and Eve are put outside of that garden, outside of the fellowship of God, outside of the friendship of God, that place, a second death, if one death of separation isn't bad enough, there's a second death of separation, a place of suffering, all in relational terms, conscious relational loss, and this is where it is different from Christ's experience, there's a despairing recognition for the lost of Christ's lordship, revelations in another place is speaking of every knee we'll bow and every tongue we'll confess that Jesus Christ is Lord and we take that as some in adoration and praise and glory and some in desperate conscious relational understanding that he was absolutely right and fair to do what he's done, we can't fully understand that, but it'll be a recognition of love lost, of being kind of like outside on a cold night with snow on your two feet deep looking in to the feast, but not being able to be there, of goodness spurned, where the deception of sin and all that sin is unmasked.

So the biblical imagery does reflect relationship lost and a relational experience that is dreadful and again it can be mirrored to a lesser degree in experiences in this life, people in hell valley, people experiencing a hellish experience, I'm not saying it's anything like hell, but we know what separation from God's love and separation from common grace and humanity can be in this world.

And can I just say one other thing about hell, and it's a oxymoron, it's a contradiction in terms, it's a solitary society, a communal place, people will not be there on their own, but there will be no heart to love one another, to love God or to love others, it will be a solitary society, the horrible, people say about big cities, there will be millions of people but you can be desperately alone, a bit like that, but much, much worse, a self-absorbed misery that's actually compounded by other people being there alone in a multitude, not the hell, it will go to hell and there will be a party there and we'll be there and God won't be there and we'll have a good old time, we won't even worry about things anymore, not so deception, deception of the evil one, it will be the civility of a cold heart, an outward tolerance of one another, but without love, no heart, no hope and no fear, impossibly bleak and the irony being, I believe, that when we don't, people don't want God now, yes, they want His gifts, they want life, they want laughter, they want wealth, they want health, but they don't want His Lordship now, but then they would do anything for it, then it will be all, they will spend eternity and it will be the only thing they want, it will be the only thing they long for, they will long for His life, for laughter, for love, for joy, for fellowship, for these things that God offers now here and now through Jesus

Christ and that I think is the greatest torment of a lost eternity. So when we speak about these things, we do need to be solemn, no, we need to be joyful when we think about heaven, but hugely solemn when we think about hell, it is an absolutely solemn, solemnizing reality.

We need to think about our hearts, if you're not a Christian here tonight, you absolutely need to consider what is important, you need to, and as Christians, we need to consider what is important, we need to consider where our neighbour is going, what our neighbour thinks, how our neighbour lives, how our friends are, we need to be passionate in prayer for them.

[ 28 : 25 ] I think if we true, I think God is gracious at one level because He keeps us from fully understanding because I think in some ways I may be completely wrong to say this, it would drive us mad, but He gives us enough to show us that we must look to Him, that we must think about every day our priorities, what's important to us, what matters, what places the gospel in our lives, are we playing at being Christians, are we thinking really that we're living for the here and now, that we've lost sight of God and that we're just living because we've shrunk Him down so much.

And again the place of prayer, now we gather on our way in the city to eat and pray, it's not a gimmick, it's not a ruse to get you to come, although I'd use anything to get us to come and pray, it's a bit like heaven, it's a meal together, that's what heaven's about, but it's an encouragement to pray because if we don't pray, we may as well shut shop and let's pray and let's keep praying and let's ask God to open up the hearts of the lost that we know and love and are burdened for because we need sometimes to think about heaven and hell and not be taken in by stupid pictures of devils with forked tails and horns and the stupidity of a society that will mock that, but look around us, look around at the beginnings of hell and people's lives and experiences now and the reality of sometimes of God's withdrawing His grace and His love and seeing that that is absolutely where we are going and that death itself in all its horribleness, even for the Christian it remains the enemy of defeated nonetheless, but it is just a massive warning to us that we know we need to think about these things, however young or however old we are that we need to recognise that God has come to help us move from darkness to light, from death to life, from beginnings of heaven now to the endings of hell now and that will be perfected in heaven for us as Christians because of God's grace and we really need to remember final destinations all of us today, so let's pray. Father God help us to live for you, to die for you and to die with you and help us to die to self today and find more and more of the experience of heaven in our lives now, may it not be kind of soft wishful thinking of a future that might or might not be, but may we be realistic in recognising the relational realities here and now of life with Christ and life without Christ and where it ends and maybe that ultimate reality of hell being a place of abject selfishness and heaven being a place of total giving in worship and in life and in fullness of life to a wonderful and glorious God, so help us to see these things and we know and I know we need the Holy

Spirit to help us to open up our eyes and to give us the power and the courage to see these things and to live them and help us as we sing together to you, a great part of heaven will surely be our praise, beautiful and sweet and uplifting and encouraging and spine tingling and hair raising praise. Amen.