

## **“What Are Heaven and Hell?”**

*Tough Questions, part #3*

Luke 16:19-31

You are in the right place this morning. You are not here by accident. These people around you love you, they appreciate you, and they are here to worship God with you. Your presence matters to them, it matters to me, and it especially matters to God. Let’s give God thanks and praise for bringing us all together this morning.

Would you please pray with me? Lord, if you have something to tell me this morning, I’m ready to listen. Look through me, test my heart, show me anything about myself I need to change, and show me your eternal way. Amen.

Have you ever received a card with a picture of heaven on it? It probably had a picture of some clouds and a cute angel or cherub or two. Many people imagine heaven is very feathery, light, and lacking color, maybe something like this commercial. (Halo Top “My Territory”)

We see a lot of pop culture images of heaven and hell depicted here. People with wings. A devil with horns, a tail, and cloven feet. Now, I’ve never seen any of those descriptions in the Bible. And part of the reason that I have chosen this hard topic for today is, I’d rather learn about heaven and hell from the Bible than from an ice cream commercial.

Today is the first time I have ever preached on heaven and hell. The reason is simple. I tend to preach on topics based on my experiences. I don’t know much about heaven and hell because, obviously, I haven’t died yet. So I cannot tell you for sure what either one looks like.

While none of us in this room have been there, I still find it very interesting that every culture and religion has some doctrine of heaven and hell. These are not just Christian ideas. There must be a part of us that admits, this life is not all there is. There is a widespread belief that when our earthly lives end, there is a destination for us, and it has something to do with our behavior and choices in this life. No matter what religion you study, this belief exists.

I have a theory. I believe that God has put eternity in our hearts. That's why we want to talk about heaven and hell. And honestly, most people just want to talk about heaven. But I contend that you can't believe in just one eternal destination; if you believe in one, you must believe in both.

Let's look a little at what the Bible teaches about the afterlife, starting with hell. It may surprise you to know that there is not one consistent description of hell in the Bible. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word, Sheol, is used to describe a place where the dead go. It is a place, not of punishment, but simply of death and decay. English words usually translate Sheol as “grave” or “pit.” For example, in Genesis 37:35, Jacob, when he thinks Joseph is dead, says, “I will continue to mourn until I join my son in Sheol (the grave).” Psalm 30:3 says, “O Lord, you have brought up my soul from Sheol; you restored me to life from among those who go down to the pit.” (Psalm 30:3)

In the New Testament, there are three words for hell: Hades, Tartarus, and Gehenna. Hades and Tartarus are words taken from Greek mythology. Gehenna refers to a garbage dump in a valley outside of Jerusalem where people burned their trash. Obviously, no matter what you call it, hell, particularly as it is described in the New Testament, is not a nice place to go.

Heaven is the place we really want to talk about. You may be surprised to know that heaven is not mentioned in the Old Testament at all. We have a few suggestions – the Garden of Eden, for example, but most of the time, when the Old Testament speaks of eternal life, it is more about the joy of being in God’s presence than being in a location. (Psalm 16, 23, and 73, Isaiah 26:19, for example).

It is really when we read the New Testament that heaven takes the main stage, and in many of Jesus’ teachings, there is a clear contrast between heaven and hell, eternal life and destruction. For example, Jesus speaks of the wide and narrow gates (Matthew 7:13-14), being inside and outside of the heavenly banquet (Matthew 22:1-14), and the places prepared for the faithful “sheep” and the wicked “goats.” (Matthew 25:31-46) It is clear in Jesus’ time, people did believe in eternal life, heaven and hell, and many of them wanted to know from Jesus what heaven was like. Remember, the most important message Jesus preached was, “The kingdom of heaven has come near!” (Mark 1:15, among others.) Finally, in the book of Revelation, we find images of light, God’s throne, and heavenly beings surrounding God in worship.

The point is, there is no one description of heaven or hell in the Bible, but rather, a variety of images. But even though we might not know all the details about them, we affirm in the Christian church that heaven and hell are real places. And they are destinations for humans after we die.

Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus is another one of those uncomfortable scriptures that we have to deal with. First of all, let me explain, I do not believe this scripture is a literal description of heaven or hell. You can disagree with me if you want. But the purpose of this parable is to tell us that our

actions have consequences eternally. I believe with all my heart, what we do now, in this life, is practice for eternity.

The rich man in the story practiced selfishness. He literally stepped over Lazarus every day, completely ignoring the beggar while indulging in the fine things in life: expensive clothing, great food. The rich man only thought of himself.

Lazarus, on the other hand, practiced humility, although it is not clear if it was his choice or not. As Jesus tells this story, the emphasis is on the contrast. Poor Lazarus, when he dies, is favored by God; the angels carry him up to Abraham. The rich man is not favored by God, and he is sent to hell in agony.

But this parable is not about moralism. This is not a lesson that “good people go to heaven and bad people go to hell.” Not at all. What does the rich man say? “Let Lazarus go to my brothers and warn them.” (Luke 16:27-28) Although he first realizes it in hell, the rich man finally learns that his choices do matter in eternity.

Abraham replies that there is already enough information for people to know God’s will and avoid the suffering described. He says, “They have all of Moses and the prophets.” (Luke 16:29) In other words, they have the scriptures to tell them how to receive eternal life. I affirm that teaching, don’t you?

Sadly, Jesus says that some people still reject the truth. In fact, the final verse of this parable, although spoken by Abraham, is really spoken by Jesus himself. “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” (Luke 16:31)

So while this parable is about heaven and hell, at its core, it is really about finding salvation. The Bible tells us the truth about God. It tells us the truth

about love, compassion, grace, evil, eternity and more. The Bible tells us God’s plan. It is our choice to believe it.

Here is what I believe about heaven and hell, in a nutshell. This is what I get out of the whole picture of scripture, from Genesis to Revelation. Heaven is a place where all worship God. In hell, no one worships God. In various passages, Jesus tells us people in hell curse, weep, mourn, and gnash their teeth in anger and regret. Hell is a place where one realizes what was lost.

But I will never say in a sermon that someone is destined for heaven or hell. To me, that is secondary. Yes, God gives us a choice between heaven and hell. But the choice is really about Jesus and his free offer of salvation. Hell is not a punishment for failing the test of life. Hell is an act of mercy for those who do not want to worship God. They could not stand the presence of God at all, because their whole life, they have rejected him.

Jesus proclaimed that he is salvation itself, the way, the truth, and the life. (John 14:6) In fact, that is the topic of my sermon next week. But what I want us to understand today is that we always have a choice to follow Jesus or reject him. Heaven and hell are just the natural consequences of that choice.

I know this revelation leads to hard questions, such as, “What about those who lived before Jesus? What about those who never heard of Jesus?” And to those questions I simply say, I don’t know. Instead, I trust God to have the answers.

There is one thing that I do know for certain. All of us in this room, right now, have heard this message. We can respond to it. And we can spread it to others.

It is truly a wonderful thing that today is Worldwide Communion Sunday. Communion is the very essence of the gospel itself. In it we proclaim the forgiveness of God. We give each and every person today a chance to respond to Jesus. We all have the choice. In the next moment, you could come forward for the first time to receive communion, and in that very moment, acknowledge your sins and trust Jesus as Savior. Or you might do it for the fiftieth time.

Heaven and hell are important. Our choices in this life matter very much. But only God knows what is inside of someone's heart. I cannot tell you today where you will end up. I can simply tell you that if you trust Jesus and follow Him, the kingdom of heaven will come to you.

Let's pray.

### Memory verse

Matthew 7:21 – “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”

### Reflection questions

1. What do you think heaven is like? Is there a scriptural basis for your answer?
2. What do you think hell is like? Why?
3. Why did the rich man go to hell in the parable?
4. Why did Lazarus go to heaven?
5. How do our choices regarding Jesus affect our eternity? What choice have you made?