

Heaven & Hell, or a REAL Future?

Among the Most Prevalent Subjects in all of Christianity, the Eternal Destination of the Human Soul occupies First Place in Interest of Believers.

Why are Churches so Adamant on a Subject where Scriptures are so Unclear?

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Rarely will a week go by where the typical church-goer isn't reminded of the assurance that ones' eternal destiny is conditioned upon their adherence to the tenets of the particular religion that their own church espouses. It seems to be the main focus and intent of religiosity, to bring all believers into a condition where a blissful eternity in Heaven is assured. After all, what greater quest could there be? Religious pitch men will press passers-by with the question: "Brother, are you sure you're going to Heaven"? Those who are self-assured will usually respond in the affirmative, and those who aren't sure, or who are afraid they aren't, will cringe and move on, pretending they didn't hear the question.

A Deep-Rooted Belief Structure

The teaching that peoples' immortal soul, at death, will be assigned to either of two diametrically opposed destinations, is deeply- rooted both in religion and even in the secular world. It has been from time immemorial! It's a universally foregone conclusion! Few, it seems, ever thought to ask the insightful questions, and those who have raised any question are generally dismissed.

But people **have** asked the important questions. Only, too few have engaged their thought faculties, sufficiently to pose a credible challenge to the overwhelming preponderance of opinion.

A Most Pressing Question

Human destiny, beyond this lifetime, has proven to be the most enigmatic question of all time. Is there a conscious 'afterlife'? Believe it or not, the matter wasn't introduced by the Christian religion, nor for that matter, by the patriarchs of the Old Testament, despite the fact that Judaism to some degree had accommodated a heaven and

hell concept in their belief system from pre-Christian times. But, their source of that isn't well publicized!

Moses even grew up and was educated in a culture that had long regarded that there **was** a conscious afterlife. Particularly as it involved their nobility and their Pharaohs! Yet, despite this, we find little in the Old Testament to support the belief in a conscious afterlife. In fact, quite the contrary!

From an On-Line Overview:

The following several paragraphs, indicated by the different typestyle, were taken from a reputable religious website, explaining the common persuasions regarding the ideas of 'going to Heaven' (or Hell)! **These quotes do not reflect the views of this author** or of all Sabbatarian Churches of God. What it does for us is to present insight into the common perceptions found in the religious world today.

"What is our eventual condition after we die? Do we eventually land up in Heaven, Hell or Purgatory? Do we simply disappear and cease to exist in any form? Do we just sleep for a long time after death before waking up for a final judgment? Are we reincarnated into new bodies?

Different Judeo-Christian faith groups and writers over the past few thousand years have proposed a variety of scenarios, covering these options and more! All have based their beliefs on their interpretations of the Bible. Generally speaking, we find these views:

The Roman Catholic Church bases its belief on Heaven, Purgatory and Hell on some main biblical passages in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures (Old & New Testaments) and the 14 books of the Apocrypha, supplemented by church wisdom.

Conservative and mainline **Protestant** denominations tend to base their belief on the literal interpretation of certain passages of the Bible, and symbolic interpretations of others. They arrive at very different beliefs from the Roman Catholics because they select different passages to read literally.

Liberal Christians generally believe that the beliefs of the authors of the Bible evolved greatly over the approximately one millennia of years during which the Bible was written. Thus, there is little internal consistency in the Bible about the afterlife. Many liberals remain undecided on the existence and nature of any form of afterlife.

Humanists, Atheists, Agnostics, etcetera, are generally skeptical about the existence of an afterlife. Most see no evidence for any form of human consciousness continuing after death. However, a person's influence lives on in their children and in other lives that they have touched.

Faced with such a diversity of beliefs about life after death -- even within Christianity -- some people conclude that nobody really knows what happens when a person dies. But most Christians hold tenaciously to the beliefs taught by their own particular denomination. Most followers of other religions also follow the teachings of their faith tradition. This satisfies one of the main needs that many people have of their religion: to give them a sense of security in the face of an uncertain and frightening world and the inevitability of their personal death.

Where Are these Places?

Perhaps one of the most daunting premises of Christianity and all Bible-based belief systems is the question: Do Heaven and Hell really exist? Most would reply in the affirmative! But based on what? Solid clear Scriptures? Are these real places or are they 'ethereal'?

Now, the component that 'goes there', as we say, is non-material. The 'soul' is regarded as being a non-physical component of our existence. So why would these locations even need to be real in the sense of having a defined location and finite dimensions? Many people think of heaven and hell as places, removed from the Earth. They may see Heaven as a place

where "good" people go when they die. Many see Hell as another place, possibly under-ground, where "bad" people face endless torture in burning pits of fire and brimstone.

Heaven IS Real!

The Bible describes a heaven where Jesus has ascended, where His Father's Throne exists and where angels worship God. Jesus tells His disciples about what is perceived by some as referring to heaven in John 14:2, saying, *"In my Father's house are many mansions (rooms); if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you."*

Comment: What is left out of consideration is the picture that He will return for them, and be with them! Already a concept contrary to the common take. But the following paragraphs present more common explanations regarding belief in an ever-conscious 'afterlife'.

The Apostle Paul tells us, *"Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands"*. (2nd Corinthians 5:1).

In 2nd Kings 2, the Prophet Elijah is swept into (the first) heaven in a whirlwind. And in Mark 12:25, Jesus tells the Pharisees what happens when married people die, saying, *"When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven."* (Notice: When they rise from the dead!)

Jesus says in Matthew 8:11-12 that people of faith will join saints and prophets from the Old Testament at the Lord's table, while others will be left outside: *"I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

Those outside would, presumably, be sent to hell. Perhaps the most detailed story is from Luke 16:22-24, which tells of the disparate fortunes of a rich man named Lazarus and a beggar: *"The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was*

buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'"¹

Several biblical passages indicate that heaven and earth will one day, without fanfare, be destroyed to make way for the glorious return of Christ. *"But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare."* (2nd Peter 3:10).²

Peter goes on to caution all of us to be prepared for God's judgment whenever that day comes: *"For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them into gloomy dungeons to be held for judgment; if he did not spare the ancient world when he brought the flood on its ungodly people, but protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others; if he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard) - if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to **hold** the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment. This is especially true of those who follow the corrupt desire of the sinful nature and despise authority."* (2nd Peter 2:4-10)

Comment: We should notice that in the verse given above, the unrighteous are held pending sentencing which will come at "the Day of Judgment", not the date of their death. This revelation sheds light on the condition of the 'rich man' of Luke 16:22-24, being described as being in a holding condition, (as is Lazarus), antici-

¹ Much is read into this passage, while an equal amount is overlooked. Read my article on this insightful narrative titled *"Lazarus and the Rich Man"*. The word for Hell in this verse is the grave, (*sheol*) not an ever burning hell! (*gehenna*).

² This passage is commonly mis-identified as to what event it describes.

pating his pending (imminent) sentence to punishment. Most religious explanations disregard this situation!

Heaven: Our Intended Destination?

Based on Jesus' teachings and other sources of revelation, Christians believe that God created human beings to live eternally in fellowship with Him. The future as described in the Bible includes the **resurrection** of all people, a **judgment**, and eternal life in either heaven or hell.

Comment: Another insightful passage, and another obvious technical oversight: The resurrection precedes the judgment and the judgment precedes assignment to ones' just reward. However, one assignment is to eternal life, but the other is to a condition referred to as having 'perished', (e.g. John 3:16) not an ever-conscious state.

All of the descriptions of heaven and hell in the Bible are strongly metaphorical. Most Christians think of heaven as a realm of some sort out of normal space-time. However the Biblical description often suggests a renewed earth. This could either mean that the heavenly realm is separate, but with a certain degree of similarity to our current world (the most common Christian view), or that God will **renew and transform the earth**.³

Christians are not agreed on the exact details of how this will happen. However the differences tend to involve details of timing, and other issues that don't seem worth dealing with here.

³ Why transform the earth if it's not to be inhabited? Actually, there are to be **two** major 'transformations'. A material one after Christ's return to establish the Kingdom of God on earth, and another dramatically different total transformation that will occur after the millennial age ends when Christ surrenders up the Kingdom to the Father **after** all of humanity has been taken completely thru the salvational process and final sentencing (to life or eternal death) has been accomplished, and the 'last enemy (death) has been destroyed'. (We read of that in places such as 1st Cor. 15:24-28, 2nd Pet. 3:10-13 & Rev. 21:1) This 'day of God' mentioned in 2nd Peter is often mis-identified with the 'day of the Lord', that series of events associated with Christ's second coming. Rather, this event is after the 1000 years.

The fact that human beings are created with an eternal destiny should have a significant impact on our priorities. It often seems that governments, nations, and other institutions are the enduring feature of human history, and people are transient elements. Christianity says that this is radically wrong. One cannot treat people as disposable adjuncts to the nation or other institution: ultimately it is the people who matter.

Note that there is a subtle difference between resurrection and the existence of an eternal soul. Many religions have held that human beings have an immaterial soul, which does not die when the body does. Christians generally agree with this (although a small number do not). **However the distinctive Christian doctrine is not the eternal nature of the soul, but the resurrection of the body.** Humans are unified beings. The body is an essential part of the person. In heaven (it is posed that) there will be some analog of the body.

Judgment

Christians believe that there will be a judgment. In this, everyone's life will be evaluated. Those who depend upon Christ for salvation can be assured that they will pass this judgment. However the quality of their lives will still become known, and everything in their lives that was not built on Christ will be purged. The Bible talks of their work being tested with fire.

The common belief is that there are two different outcomes for eternal life: heaven and hell. There is not a precise description of either heaven or hell, nor are we told how many people will end up in each. They are described using terms that seem metaphorical: a city built of gold in heaven, a lake of fire for hell.

Comment: Rather than being declared metaphorical (a situation made necessary by the creation of the heaven / hell idea), both this City and the Lake of Fire are described as being **on earth!** Even the 'New Jerusalem', the one after the earthly millennial Jerusalem, described in Revelation 21 is shown being brought out of heaven to earth. Why? That's where the people of God are and are going to be!

Accountability

All major Christian traditions say that in the end every-

one will end up in either heaven or hell. At first glance, it sounds like we won't be held accountable for what we did, as long as we manage to meet the minimal criteria for salvation. In fact there are several ways of maintaining some kind of accountability.

Catholics believe in a condition called "purgatory". This is a "place" (not necessarily an actual physical place, of course) where those who will end up in heaven are purified. Traditional Catholic theology says that when God forgives sins, he removes the guilt. However there may still be consequences. One of those consequences is that "temporal punishment" is still owed. The goal of this punishment is to be cleansed, and made fit for heaven.

Note that purgatory only applies to people who will be admitted into heaven. It is not part of hell, nor is it some kind of intermediate state between heaven and hell. It is in a sense the entranceway into heaven.

Traditionally, Catholics believe it is appropriate to pray for those that are in purgatory. These prayers, as well as masses said for them, etc, may in some way ease their process of purgation. This is one aspect of the general Catholic concept that those on earth and those in heaven retain a spiritual connection with each other. (This is called the "communion of saints".) Those on earth may ask for intercession from the saints, and may intercede for those in purgatory.

Protestants do not normally accept the concept of purgatory. There are several objections. Among the most important are: It implies that Christ's death for us isn't enough. The Bible says in several places that any interaction with the dead is forbidden.

The concept was also discredited by various abuses with which it was surrounded in the 16th Century. These made it look like the Church was selling salvation, or at least release from Purgatory.

Thus Protestants normally object to anything that looks like Purgatory, as well as prayers for the dead. It is often said that prayers for the dead suggest a lack of trust in God, since God will judge them justly.

You can see the difference clearly if you attend both Protestant and Catholic services. When someone in the congregation has died, Catholics will ask for prayers for them and their family, while Protestants will ask only for prayers for their family. Despite the

rejection of Purgatory, many Protestant groups are still concerned to maintain accountability for what has been done during life.

Many Protestants believe that there will be different levels of honor in heaven. Many Protestants also believe that even saved people will go through a process where their entire lives are reviewed and judged, even though their final destination is not in doubt. This is sometimes described as the "bema seat judgment". As a result of it, Christ's followers will be rewarded according to the quality of their work. This is contrasted to the "great white throne" judgment, which determines whether someone will spend eternity in heaven or hell.⁴

(It should be noted that the terms "bema seat judgment" and "great white throne judgment" are not standard among all Protestants. They are based largely on one specific eschatological system.)

Note that Protestants do believe that those who are in heaven have been freed from sin. However the way in which this happens is thought of somewhat differently. For Protestants, our righteousness comes from Christ, because we are united to him in faith. When our nature is perfected in heaven, this happens because our union with Christ is perfected, and his righteousness fills us fully.

The same difference occurs here as in the doctrine of justification: Catholic theology tends to envision the Christian life as due to the growth of grace in us, while Protestant theology tends to envision the Christian life as due to an increasing transparency to the presence of Christ. The doctrine of Purgatory seems oriented towards the Catholic description.

Why Does Hell Exist?

Currently there is a good deal of discussion among Christians about the morality of hell: it is said that a

⁴ This is where clear biblical teaching contrasts with common teachings. Recognition of the 'problem' is what necessitates this convoluted explanation. In fact, once we understand that the 'soul' is unconscious and un-sentenced until the resurrection and the time judgment (its sentencing phase) occurs, these problems are resolved. As to the different levels of honor, those are the result of their 'works', a word typically shunned with regard to salvation. Read my article: "*Grace, Works and Reward*" for explanation of Rev. 14:13 & 20:13.

good God would not **condemn people to an eternity of torture**. However that has been the belief of most Christians through most of Christian history. It is alleged to be supported by the Biblical account. The alternative seems about as bad: that God will force himself on people who do not want him.⁵

Note that it is not necessary to say that God imposes hell as punishment. It may be the automatic (indeed logically unavoidable) consequence of rejecting God. It is not clear that God makes it intentionally unpleasant. It may be the nature of the people who are there, and the fact that they are finally given what they want: freedom from God's rule in their lives.

Many criticisms of judgment suggest that it is arrogant to say that Christian ideas are true and others are false. "How can you be so arrogant to believe that Christians will go to heaven and everyone else will go to hell"? As we will see below, most Christians don't believe this. However the idea that this is arrogant seems odd. We don't criticize mathematics teachers for saying that 2 + 2 is always 4, and that believing sincerely in 5 is not acceptable. Either there is a God or there isn't.

Either Christ died to save us or he didn't. If he did, it's hard to see how it can be arrogant to say so. If he didn't, then Christians are wrong, but not arrogant.

I would say that ultimately hell is a result of the "hardness" of created reality. Let me try to explain: Christianity believes that the universe has a real existence, and that it is distinct from God. (This is a specific position, which not all religions and philosophies accept. For some, there isn't a real distinction between God and the universe.) In order to provide us with a region (could we say 'opportunity period') in which we can make our own decisions and take our own actions, God set up a universe that operates under dependable laws. Possibly there are other ways he could have worked. But we don't know of any other way to set things up so that we have real lives of our own.

⁵ It is the creation of the concept of an ever-burning Hell that creates this obvious objection. Gehenna fire is not everlasting in its duration, but in its finality. The Lake of Fire consumes both body and soul, creating an extinction from which there is no further consciousness or chance of resurrection.

The existence of a real universe with dependable laws has consequences. One of those consequences is the fact that people can have incorrect ideas. If they misunderstand the way the universe works, damage may result. Most of us understand this in the realm of science and engineering. There is no reason that theology should be different. If there weren't any distinction between truth and falsehood, nor any consequences to error, we would be living in an amorphous mess (the metaphysical equivalent of "gray goo"). There would be no way to live sensibly.

The standard Christian position is that salvation is only available through Christ. This isn't because God is biased towards Christians. Rather, it's a consequence of the way the universe works. Heaven is by (assigned) definition eternal life with God. But Christ is God's way of establishing relationships between human beings and Himself. He is the divine logos, the agent of creation. It is inherently impossible to be with God without being in Christ. If a human being somehow managed to be in God's presence bypassing Christ, that person would be unmade. (Better said, incinerated. 1st Tim. 6:16)

The only alternatives I can see to hell are for God to arrange for everyone to accept Christ, or for him to destroy everyone who does not. As you'll see below, each of these alternatives has its supporters. However most Christians believe that if everyone ends up choosing God, human existence is a sham: God loaded the dice to such an extent that there were no real human decisions. Most Christians also believe that a part of us is immortal. For God to destroy it would be an interference in the created order that would seriously violate its integrity. Before judging these issues, I'd ask you to look at some additional considerations.

Is Hell's Punishing Unfair?

The standard Christian position is that anyone who rejects Christ will end up in hell. Does this mean that only Christians can be saved? The Catholic church and many Protestant churches don't think so.⁶ They believe it is possible that Christ can come to someone in an inward and spiritual way, even if they've never heard of Christ. Thus someone can be an "anonymous

Christian." That is, they can know Christ spiritually without realizing it is Christ.⁷

Most Christians also believe that God's judgment will take into account the sorts of **opportunities** a person had to learn the truth.⁸ A person who has never heard the Gospel can't be said to have rejected Christ. An even worse situation occurs when Christians have persecuted other groups. A person who sees Christ as a persecutor has hardly had a real exposure to the Gospel. (Historical note: It's worth noting that two major classical Protestant writers thought it was possible for non-Christians to be saved: Zwingli and Wesley did. Calvin did not.)

Alternatives to Hell?

There is a substantial minority view, which says that God will find some way to reach everyone. This is called "**universalism**". A few 20th Century thinkers have also suggested that those who are not destined for heaven are simply destroyed. This is called "**annihilationism**".⁹

Most Christians think that both of these alternative views are ruled out by teachings in the Bible. Jesus himself speaks of judgment, and of "Gehenna" and "the outer darkness". **Comment:** Gehenna suggests being consumed by fire, while 'outer darkness' suggests an unconsciousness state!

⁷ We see here obvious conflicts against what is logical and just. The conflict being generated by misunderstandings due to the false concepts of Heaven and Hell. Once we come to understand the overall Plan of God correctly, with the mil-lennial age and the resurrections from the dead and eternal judgment as the bible really presents, better answers are seen. The unfortunate idea that rides with this approach could be to dissuade the person being offered an opportunity for salvation now to defer responding appropriately, thus missing his chance.

⁸ This expectation is correct, and explains the purpose for the post-millennial second resurrection.

⁹ Interesting thing, there is a grain of truth in each of these two approaches. Universally, all **will** be presented with an opportunity for salvation. The second resurrection provides that to those who died without having had a real opportunity in their lifetimes. All who reject their opportunity (no matter when it is provided them) will be annihilated in the Lake of Fire at the very end of time. The free 96-page booklet "*Understanding the Resurrections of the Dead and Eternal Judgment*" explains how each of the resurrections factors into the Plan of God. Request your free copy from this author.

⁶ This, of course, contradicts Acts 4:12.

While most Christians reject universalism and annihilationism as doctrines, many orthodox Christians hold positions that are very close. Let's look at them briefly:

There is no statement in the Bible about how many will be damned. When someone asks Jesus this, he deflects the question. He does say that the way to salvation is narrow, and that many follow the road to destruction. However we can still hope that in the end God will deflect those on the easy road to destruction to the narrow road. I believe universalism as a doctrine is unorthodox, but desire that a hope for all is possible.

A number of orthodox 20th Century writers point out that those who are in hell are not the same kind of people as those in heaven. Human beings are designed to live with God. In heaven our humanity is perfected. Hell is not described in any detail in the Bible. **The descriptions that most people hear are based on speculative fiction, such as Dante's.** However if humanity is created to be with God, then it is reasonable to believe that those who are finally separated from God in hell are less than fully human. Several writers refer to them as equivalent to "ashes", the remnants of what used to be a human life. Thus we may not have two groups of people living next to each other, with the saved watching the damned living in torture. Hell, whatever it is, has less reality than heaven. This is suggested by Jesus' most common way of referring to it. He calls it Gehenna. This was the garbage pit outside of Jerusalem, although the term also was used in discussions of the last judgment.

Could Hitler end up in Heaven?

Heaven and hell are not a matter of totaling up good deeds and bad deeds and seeing which predominates. From the Christian perspective, if it comes to merit, no one merits heaven, and we've all done enough bad for hell to be justified. However God doesn't want anyone to end up in hell. Anyone who depends upon him for rescue will be saved from hell. **Comment:** This author might benefit from reading passages such as Matthew 7:21-23. Lawlessness (iniquity), even religious lawlessness among the devout, carries serious consequences!

There are several questions that are asked so commonly that I think they're worth looking at here. Here are two examples:

Could Hitler end up in heaven if he repented at the last minute? ¹⁰ **Comment:** We should keep in mind that it is God who grants repentance. It is not something that the likes of Hitler could 'pull out of his sleeve' at the last moment, as this internet author poses. Such an idea disregards what the conversion process is all about and how it works.

It seems unfair for God to save people just because they are Christians. There are lots of rotten Christians and lots of good non-Christians.

I'm going to try to deal with that whole class of questions here. Note that in doing so I'm going to make my own opinions a bit more obvious than I do elsewhere in these essays. I am quite sure that there are answers from Catholic and Orthodox perspectives, but I'm not in a position to argue convincingly from those viewpoints.

First, the Bible doesn't give us precise information as to who will end up in heaven or hell. We are warned particularly not to judge other people (except to the extent that we have specific responsibilities for church discipline or as officials involved with the legal system). This means that discussing specific people such as Hitler is dangerous. We don't know what is going on with individuals. Hitler looks particularly evil. But someone completely unremarkable may be just as evil, but may not have had enough political power to have the terrible effect that Hitler did. Perhaps Hitler was completely insane, and not responsible for his actions. (I seriously doubt it, but we don't know for sure what was going on in his heart.) ¹¹

However more important, I need to warn you that heaven isn't a reward for being good. The basic Protestant model for salvation is as follows: God

¹⁰ Such a question reveals a lack of understanding as to how the salvation process works!

¹¹ This consideration is faulty in that it disregards the development of righteous character, a prime requirement (result) of conversion, which is predicated upon the receipt of God's Spirit. When did Hitler have occasion to do that? Deathbed conversions are similarly ineffective. When we allow the understanding of the second resurrection to factor into the picture, these moot questions become answerable!

chooses us. We respond with faith, which basically means that we rely on God for salvation. God forgives us, and simultaneously starts renewing us and getting rid of our sin

There is certainly a connection between faith and being good: Faith is our side of the bond that connects us to God. God will use that connection to regenerate us and get rid of our sin. **The process isn't finished in this life,**¹² but it certainly is started. Christians should be better than if they weren't Christians. Jesus said that you will know His followers by the fruits that they bear.

It would be nice if we could say that the best half (or whatever) of mankind are Christians and the worst half are non-Christians. Unfortunately, I'm afraid it isn't going to be quite that neat. Some people become Christians late in their life, and so the process has only started when they approach death. Some Christians may be in more dangerous positions than non-Christians. Some Christians may have been born with really bad tempers, etc, which makes them look more evil than they actually are.

So I'd say that there should be real evidence of regeneration operating in the lives of Christians, but you shouldn't expect that all the people who look good are Christians and all those who look bad are non-Christians, as it would involve knowing their hearts. Here's one thing to think about: What happens to someone who is relatively good in this life, but who does not have faith? Unfortunately, he may end up rejected. In theory this person could be the best person who ever lived (except Jesus, who was without sin). The problem is that by not having faith, they do not have the connection through which God will take care of their remaining sin. Even though there aren't very many visible problems, they (and the underlying addiction to sin of which they are symptoms) can't be dealt with. Thus these persons can't be made fit for salvation.

Now the obvious response to this is: so why shouldn't people just go ahead and be evil, if heaven isn't based on being good? While salvation isn't a reward for reaching a certain quota of good acts, you won't attain it unless you have a relationship with God through which you can be renewed. Someone who says "let me

be evil for my whole life, and repent at the last minute" almost certainly isn't going to be capable of repenting in any way that does him any good. In having that intention, he has already rejected the kind of faith that is needed for salvation.

Comment: Those who advocate this view are apparently unaware that repentance is a gift of God, not something that a person can genuinely conjure up from within himself at will. (Rom. 2:4-5) Knowing that one needs to repent and failing to do so creates a hardness of heart from which a person can not of himself break away.

Strictly speaking, salvation isn't even a reward for having faith. It's not that God is rewarding you for faith and punishing you for not having faith. Rather, it's that God uses a certain kind of relationship in order to make you fit for salvation. Faith is a key part of that relationship. If you're sloppy about building a bridge it may fall down. Nature isn't consciously punishing you. It's just the way the universe is built. In my view, one of the spiritual laws of the universe is that in order to end up saved, you have to have justifying faith (not just intellectual belief -- justifying faith means that you rely on and commit yourself to God as your Savior).

Common Views = Common Misperceptions

In this lengthy narrative we have seen many misconceptions which are the result of the heaven & hell belief system. While the general conceptions of main-stream religion are well represented, many obvious biblical Truths are of necessity are laid aside. What should be evident at this point is that it is nearly impossible to correctly understand the process of conversion and the ultimate destiny of mankind while operating under the prevailing heaven & hell orientation.

It can be seen from the above explanations what the heaven & hell belief system obscures:

- 1) It mis-identifies what a **soul** is,
- 2) It negates the **resurrections** (and any real need for them),
- 3) It fails to factor-in the opportunity for **salvation** to all who ever lived,

¹² This astute admission, of salvation being an ongoing process, is rare in the evangelical world.

4) It barely alludes to the true **destiny** of mankind,

5) It mis-defines the millennial **Kingdom of God**.

What IS the Soul?

It is well known that human existence involves three basic components. Body, soul and spirit! What is commonly referred to as 'the soul' is more correctly identified as the human spirit. It is the spirit in man that accounts for intellect and consciousness. (1st Cor. 2:11) The soul, as defined biblically, is the physical **life** imparted to our bodies. Animals are described as not having souls, but as being souls. Just as an example, the Hebrew word, **nephesh**, (Heb. #5315) used in places such as Genesis 2:7 and also (1:21, 1:24 & 2:19, etc.), is alternately translated 'soul' or 'creature', even if specifically referring to animals. The soul is the animal life component of humans and animals. We each experience death in similar manner. (Eccl. 3:19) It is the **spirit** (our mentality) that distinguishes us from the animal kind, and is what we should be referring to if we want to indicate a person's conscious intellect.

What Purpose the Resurrections?

If the common idea is correct, that a person is awarded his just reward immediately upon death, is taken to heaven (or not), then what possible reason would there be for the doctrine of the resurrections of the dead? But, as we see even in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, a resurrection factors heavily into the equation. Further, the resurrection is a vital component of the overall Plan of God to offer opportunity to those billions who died not ever having had a real opportunity. Thus, their being in everlasting torment in hell complicates any explanation as to when and why they would be resurrected and have 'the books' opened to them.

Man's TRUE Destiny

What is absent among traditional believers is the comprehension of what mankind's ultimate purpose is. We are created mortal, but need to take on immortality. (1st Cor. 15:53) That condition can

only be acquired at and after the first resurrection, which occurs only at the second coming. (1st Cor. 15:52) Immortality at that time can be bequeathed only to those who have God's Spirit and who live in the Spirit. God is in the process of making of us a new creation, fit to live eternally with Him where He is. Just shedding our physical lives and discarding our mortal bodies is not sufficient modification to warrant that new form of existence. This mortal must **put on** immortality, and the place that affirms that tells us **WHEN** that condition will be attained: at the resurrection at the Last Trump! (1st Cor. 15:35-54)

One might ask, then what is the situation when a person dies? We are clearly told that human consciousness (the spirit) is placed in God's hands and is preserved in a sleep-like state, until the appropriate resurrection, the first, or a later one. (There is more than one! (Rev. 20:5) (Luke 23:46; John 5:24-29; Acts 7:59 (Matt. 25:31-46; Ezek. 37: etc.))

It is God's purpose to replicate the Character of His Son in His human creation. We are to eventually become **LIKE** Him in both nature and form. (1st Jn.3:2) It's that regenerate condition (what is refer-red to as true conversion) that can be justified before the Throne of THE Father as being a person worthy of eternal preservation.

Opportunity for Salvation

We all can cite many situations where individuals have been denied a true opportunity for salvation, through no fault of their own! Start with infants who die before attaining any level of awareness. Consider those vast multitudes who lived and died before the first century. Vast areas of earth were never evangelized prior to the last three centuries. Are those who were not provided opportunity to suffer the same inescapable fate as those who rejected salvation and adamantly refused to repent of their sins?

The writer above poses that question. (Page 5, top right column) **Would a good God condemn people to an eternity of torture?**, doing so as recompense for just a few decades of casual indifference? Add to that these questions. Would

God rightfully consign ignorant offenders, who were never provided opportunity to the same fate as desperately evil reprobates? Is it justice that people who died millennia ago would suffer hundreds or thousands of years longer than those who die more recently?

No, logically, a Just and Loving God would provide the same opportunity for salvation to any and all before consigning them to eternal condemnation.

But, if that is the case, when and how will that be?

That is where the resurrections of the dead factors in. Be sure to request the free 96-page booklet *"Understanding the Resurrections of the Dead and Eternal Judgment"*, available from the address given under the title of this article. God has a plan to provide opportunity to those who died without ever having had a true opportunity to repent, be baptized and to receive God's Spirit.

The TRUE Kingdom of God

Despite the clear statement that 'flesh and blood can not inherit the Kingdom of God', religious people incessantly define just such a condition. They define the Kingdom of God as being here and now on earth, composed of imperfect humanity. (In other words, Christendom! Even apostate Christendom!) Rather, the bible is clear that a Kingdom is coming to earth with and after the return of Christ when He will assume power over the nations. (So, IF Christ is here on earth, then who will be spending eternity up in Heaven? How could they be 'ever with Him' if He is here and they are there?)

The Apostles will head up each of the twelve tribes of Israel, (Mt. 19:28) under the resurrected King David. (Ezek. 37:24-25) The Saints (made immortal) will rule on earth with and under Christ. (Re. 20:6 & 5:10) The nations of earth will become the exclusive and unchallenged domain of Christ and His Spirit-Born Saints. (Rev. 11:15 & Dan. 7:14)

Intrinsic with this situation is the removal of Satan from being able to influence society. (Rev. 20:1-3) The Kingdom of God is a real ruling

government, not just an ethereal concept of well-intentioned humans living in a satanic world. Beside that, we are made aware that the ruling Christ will have left Heaven and come to Earth to set up His Kingdom, that will never be destroyed. (Dan. 7:27).

Far from being a reticent retirement condition, as people view Heaven, the Kingdom of God will be the active world ruling generation of Spirit-Born sons of God. (1st John 3:1-2) (Rom. 8:19)

Let's face it honestly, the heaven and hell concepts as commonly taught crowd aside many essential biblical truths! It obscures the real destiny of God's True Saints, living and ruling with Christ as His kings and priests, immortal, on earth, until the human redemption experience is completed. Then when the full harvest of humanity is complete, God the Father will descend to earth to join His ultimate Family. (1st Cor. 15:24-28 and Rev. 21:) 

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