

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

THE UNDENIABLE REALITY OF BOTH HEAVEN AND HELL

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The Undeniable Reality of Both Heaven and Hell

Introduction

Whether reading a book, listening to the radio, or watching the television, it is entirely possible one will come across a reference to heaven or hell. Individuals hold an array of views when it comes to this subject. Some go to the extent of formulating their own views and opinions concerning heaven and hell. For many the thought of heaven and hell is simply a myth. However, there is a biblical basis for believing that there is an eternity to come for every human being following death. Through a careful study of Scripture, one can see the undeniable reality of the existence of heaven and hell, and the certainties of death and final judgment thus gaining a practical understanding of the eternal destination that awaits every person.

The Undeniable Reality of the Existence of Heaven and Hell

There are a number of improper views held by many modern scholars concerning heaven and hell. In light of Scripture, it is important to examine a few of the most popular views in order to obtain a proper Biblical understanding of the subject. Although there are varying views, three commonly held misconceptions of heaven and hell include purgatory, universalism, and annihilationism.

Purgatory is not an entirely new phenomenon. The Catholic Church formulated the doctrine of purgatory during the 15th and 16th centuries.¹ According to Sheila E. Harty “This doctrine holds that, after death, those who die in God's grace, but are still imperfectly purified,

¹ Sheila T. Harty, "Heaven and Hell: Whither or Whether." *Journal Of Religion & Psychological Research* 28, no. 4 (October 2005): 189.

undergo further purification to achieve the holiness necessary for Heaven.”² From a practical standpoint, if someone received God’s grace, then committed a sin and died before confessing the sin, that person went to purgatory due to imperfect purification.

As opposed to the biblical view of the undeniable reality of heaven and hell, those who embrace this doctrine claim that purgatory is an intermediate place between the two.³ Tarald Rasmussen explains, “Hell could be avoided through the right use of penance; and the cleansing sufferings in purgatory could to a certain extent replace the eternal sufferings in hell.”⁴ Purgatory was in a sense similar to hell, as it also involved fire that offered individuals cleansing from forgivable sins.⁵ The idea that all Christians went to purgatory upon death also became a widely accepted view.⁶

Although those who affirm this doctrine offer a so-called biblical basis for their position, the claims do not substantiate the view.⁷ Two biblical passages stand at the forefront of this doctrine and are often cited. These passages include Zechariah 13:9 and 1 Corinthians 3:13 and speak of individuals being tested by fire. However, Harty goes on to explain that these passages

² Ibid.

³ Tarald Rasmussen, "Hell Disarmed? The Function of Hell in Reformation Spirituality." *Numen: International Review For The History Of Religions* 56, no. 2/3 (April 2009): 366.

⁴ Rasmussen, *Hell Disarmed*, 370.

⁵ Harvey D. Egen, "In Purgatory We Shall All Be Mystics." *Theological Studies* 73, no. 4 (December 2012): 877.

⁶ Rasmussen, *Hell Disarmed*, 370.

⁷ David L. Larsen, "Heaven and hell in the preaching of the gospel: a historical survey." *Trinity Journal* 22, no. 2 (September 1, 2001): 244.

are nothing more than metaphorical.⁸ The doctrine of purgatory later became a contentious issue when it brought about the deceptive practice of indulgences. This practice granted church leadership authority they did not rightly possess. It also became a money making scheme that offered false hope which misled many individuals.⁹ The false hope was that once a person died as an unbeliever, through the indulgence system this person could be bought out of hell, thus allowing another opportunity at heaven.

In spite of this widely held view, there were individuals who adamantly oppose the doctrine of purgatory and its teachings, because the doctrine provided no substantiating biblical basis.¹⁰ It seemed to be nothing more than a concoction created by mortal man. Thus, the Protestant Reformation led by Martin Luther rejected the idea of purgatory altogether including the practice of selling indulgences. Instead of a belief in an intermediary place between heaven and hell, the Protestant Reformation brought about a significant change. This change returned to a “traditional dualistic view of the relationship between heaven and hell.”¹¹

The basis for a return to a traditional view is the result of a proper understanding of Scripture. Scripture, not mortal man has supreme authority. According to Larsen, “The first mark of the true church is that “the pure Word of God is preached.”¹² The sole basis for the repudiation

⁸ Harty, *Heaven and Hell: Whither or Whether*, 190.

⁹ Rasmussen, *Hell Disarmed*, 371.

¹⁰ Larsen, *Heaven and hell*, 244.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

of the doctrine of purgatory is due to the fact that it is without “warrant of Scripture, *and* rather repugnant to the Word of God.”¹³

From the Pentateuch through the Psalms, throughout the gospels to the book of Revelation, one can see only two views when it comes to eternity. Jesus had much to say about heaven and hell. John recorded these words, “He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe in the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (John 3:36). “Jesus Christ, in his preaching, plainly declared a duality of human destinies possible for human beings in the life to come. There is a heaven to be gained and there is a hell to be spurned.”¹⁴

Another commonly held misconception of heaven and hell today is a view known as universalism. There are varying degrees of universalism and their doctrine of hell is quite robust.¹⁵ Universalism is the “theological doctrine that all men will eventually be saved or restored to holiness and happiness.”¹⁶ As previously stated, Scripture affirms both heaven and hell. It would be easy to jump to the conclusion that those who embrace universalism do not believe in hell. However, this is not the case. Many universalist affirm a doctrine of hell.¹⁷

Like the doctrine of purgatory, there are limited Scripture references used to support universalism. One of these verses is Romans 11:32 where the apostle Paul writes, “God has imprisoned all in disbelief so that He be merciful to all.” According to universalists Jurgen

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Robin Parry, "Evangelical universalism: oxymoron?." *Evangelical Quarterly* 84, no. 1 (January 2012): 10.

¹⁶ Jinsheng Luo, "Universalism in America: A Religious Perspective." *Petroleum - Gas University Of Ploiesti Bulletin, Educational Sciences Series* 62, no. 1B (September 2010): 58.

¹⁷ Parry, *Evangelical universalism: oxymoron?*, 9.

Moltmann, “Anticipating God's final judgment through dividing humankind into believers and unbelievers is wrong, because it is godless. The God of Jesus Christ is not an enemy of unbelievers and also not an executioner of the godless.”¹⁸

For the universalist, regardless of what one believes they will be one day be reconciled to God. “This reconciliation will occur regardless of whether they have trusted in or rejected Jesus as Savior during their lifetime.”¹⁹ Moltmann explains in more detail the love and acceptance God has for all peoples. “We should develop the habit of seeing every human being we meet as a believer, never doubting this and never dealing with them differently.”²⁰ Everyone should embrace this same acceptance. Like most Universalists, Moltmann cannot see how a loving God would send anyone to hell. However, God does not send people to hell. People send people to hell by the decision one makes in this life concerning God’s plan of salvation through Christ. Although the Universalist will say that all roads lead to heaven, this is simply not true.

The Universalist mindset is that all people will one day experience the joy of heaven. However, like purgatory, there is simply no substantial biblical basis for universalism. Jesus had much to say concerning heaven and hell. When one carefully studies the words of Scripture and the teachings of Jesus, it is evident that universalism is a farce.²¹ It contradicts biblical truth. Throughout the gospel of John, one can see the dualistic teaching of heaven and hell (John 3:16,

¹⁸ Jurgen Moltmann, "The Final Judgment: Sunrise of Christ's Liberating Justice." *Anglican Theological Review* 89, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 574.

¹⁹ Luo, *Universalism in America*, 59.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Derek Tidball, "Can evangelicals be universalists?." *Evangelical Quarterly* 84, no. 1 (January 2012): 25.

3:36).²² In John 14:6, Jesus made one of the boldest statements concerning the way to Heaven. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”

One may rightly conclude that the teachings of Jesus Christ alone are enough to denounce the claims of universalism. However, the New Testament says even more concerning the dualist view of heaven and hell. The Apostle Paul’s writings also contradict the teachings of universalism. Paul speaks “about two ways, two sorts of people, and two destinations, *and the* reality of judgment for the impenitent.”²³ The Bible contains many references to both heaven and hell. However, limited space does not permit an exhaustive of each reference. However, a few prominent references include Romans 1:16-17; 2:7-9; 1 Corinthians 1:18; 6:9-10; Galatians 5:21; 1 Thessalonians 4:13. These references provide indication of a distinction between two groups of people and two destinations.²⁴ One of the most compelling verses is John 3:16. Scripture says, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” Here, John presents a strong view of dualism, which opposes the Universalist idea. Again, the focus is based upon one’s decision concerning what they do with Christ, as the doors of heaven are open to only those who receive God’s plan of salvation.²⁵ In theory, universalism sounds appealing. However, one must align its teachings

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Tidball, *Can evangelicals be universalists?*, 26.

²⁵ Grant Lemarquand, "The Hell You Say": Salvation and the Final Judgment." *Anglican Theological Review* 95, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 104.

with Scripture. When doing so, universalism falls short. For, “if it cannot be found in Scripture, then, universalism, however finely nuanced, is incompatible with evangelicalism.”²⁶

A third misconception today of heaven and hell is what scholars call annihilationism. Annihilationism is the belief that when a person goes to hell, he or she will cease to exist, for this will be the “end of existence or annihilation.”²⁷ A popular proponent of this view is well-known author and conservative evangelical Anglican, John Stott. A number of Scripture passages provide graphic details of heaven and hell. Hell is referred to as a lake of fire and a place of darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Luke 13:28; Jude 6, 13; Revelation 20:15). A vivid picture such as this is somewhat hard to swallow when you think of a loving God. This was the case for Stott. Stott did not believe that one must interpret these verses in a literal sense.²⁸ Stott also believed that the “imagery of fire (found in John the Baptist's teaching, Jesus' own words, and in the book of Revelation) implies destruction.”²⁹ Hence, the term annihilation comes into play. Finally, Stott favored the annihilation because he viewed eternal separation in hell as being unjust.³⁰

Unlike universalism, annihilation does not grant everyone a free ticket to heaven. However, the consequences of one's failure to embrace God's plan of salvation do not seem to be as drastic as it is for those who hold to dualism or a traditional view of heaven and hell. Like the two previous misconceptions, there is not scriptural support for this view. While referring to

²⁶ Tidball, *Can evangelicals be universalists?*, 24.

²⁷ Lemarquand, *The Hell You Say*, 105.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

the work of J.I. Packer, Lemarquand explains some of the problems with annihilationism. There is too much evidence in Scripture that speaks of hell as being a place of eternal punishment.³¹

Scripture clearly states that those who do not know God in Jesus Christ will be “punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the majesty of His power” (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9).³²

These are three of the many misconceptions and improper views concerning heaven and hell. One must be careful not to arrive at a particular conclusion about the existence of heaven and hell for the purpose of self-gain or because of human notions of love and justice. Scripture must have the final say. When it comes to an understanding of the existence of heaven and hell, Scripture provides remarkable evidence that both are indeed firm realities.

The Certainty of Death and Final Judgment

In order to grasp the undeniable reality of heaven and hell, one must examine Scripture from the beginning. In Genesis 2:6 Scripture says, “God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being *or soul*.”³³

Without question, human beings were created in the image of God, with an eternal soul (Genesis 1:27, Ecclesiastes 3:11). Today individuals place much emphasis on the human body, while one gives little thought to the eternal soul.³⁴ Life is precious and one must not negate its significance. However, one must rightly understand that God created human beings for more than just this temporary world.

³¹ Ibid., 110.

³² Ibid.

³³ Italics mine.

³⁴ Alice Camille, "Heavenly bodies." U.S. Catholic 77, no. 3 (March 2012): 45.

With the advancement of modern medicine and the increased life span of human beings, it is easy to think that life on earth will last forever. However, when one looks at life on earth from an eternal perspective, this life amounts to nothing more than a speck of sand in comparison to all of earth's beaches. The psalmist once said, "The days of our lives are seventy years; And if by reason of strength they are eighty years, Yet their boast is only labor and sorrow; For it is soon cut off, and we fly away" (Psalm 90:10). Without question, the psalmist not only understood but also conveyed the frailty of human life and the certainty of death.

Writing on the subject of heaven and hell, Michael E. Tymn understands firsthand the frailty of human life and the certainty of death. He writes, "As the last few ounces of life force drain from the hunched, weary bodies of my parents, I helplessly watch them struggle to overcome the fear, the anxiety, the depression, and the strife so often associated with dying."³⁵ The apostle James also said that life is like "a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away." "Talk of afterlife, of heaven and hell, reminds us to number our days, to remember that the grass withers and the flower fades."³⁶ Scripture is not silent when it comes to the issue concerning the frailty of human life.

Physical death is just as real as physical birth and is imminent for all.³⁷ Upon death, the human body or flesh will cease to exist, yet the soul will continue to live forever.³⁸

³⁵ Michael E. Tymn, "Making Sense of a Horrific Hell and a Humdrum Heaven." *Journal Of Religion & Psychological Research* 24, no. 2 (April 2001): 102.

³⁶ Jaime Clark-Soles, "The afterlife: considering heaven and hell." *Word & World* 31, no. 1 (December 1, 2011): 74.

³⁷ David L. Larsen, "Heaven and hell in the preaching of the gospel: a historical survey." *Trinity Journal* 22, no. 2 (September 1, 2001): 237.

³⁸ Ann Belford Ulanov, "Heaven and hell: an anti-reductionist view." *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 34, no. 4 (June 1, 1979): 246.

The writer of Hebrews explains, “It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). It is not a matter of whether or not one will face judgment, the proper question to ask is “When will one face judgment?” One day, all humanity will face final judgment. The ultimate reality is one day “every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10-11).³⁹

Scripture explains one of two judgments that each person will face one day when death comes knocking. Death is imminent for all. The same is true of final judgment. The decision one makes concerning what one does with Christ, will determine which judgment they will face.

Those who have embraced God’s plan of salvation will one day appear at the judgment seat of Christ. Scripture explains that once the Rapture takes place, then all believers will “stand before Christ to be judged” (II Corinthians 5:10).⁴⁰ In the Greek language, the word ‘bema’ is used and its rendering is, “judgment seat.”⁴¹ Individuals are prone to view the judgment seat of Christ as some sort of punishment. However, ‘bema’ “denotes a place of prominence” rather than judgment and is likened unto a “reward seat at athletic events.”⁴² Therefore, the final judgment for believers is a stark contrast from ones typical understanding of judgment.

The Apostle John encourages the believer concerning these future rewards. In I John 1:8 he writes, “Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may

³⁹ Italics mine.

⁴⁰ David J. MacLeod, "The sixth "Last thing": the last judgment and the end of the world (Rev 20:11-15)." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157, no. 627 (July 1, 2000): 318.

⁴¹ Gary E. Gilley, "The Judgment Seat of Christ." *Journal Of Dispensational Theology* 15, no. 46: 81.

⁴² *Ibid.*

receive a full reward.” There are potential rewards for every Christian.⁴³ These rewards will be given based on the righteous deeds of an individual after having come to know Christ as Savior.⁴⁴ Just as there are potential rewards, there is also the possibility of the loss of rewards. In contrast to receiving rewards, Hoyt explains, “Some Christians will stand empty-handed, without excuse, having had much of their work and service rendered unworthy of reward. They will experience a real and eternal loss of reward, but they themselves shall be saved, yet so as through fire.”⁴⁵ Although some individuals may come up short when it comes to receiving rewards, including this author, the final judgment for believers leads to heaven while the opposite is true for unbelievers who face The Great White Throne Judgment.

Those who fail to embrace God’s plan of salvation will one day appear at The Great White Throne Judgment. The Apostle John gives the reader just a glimpse of this judgment. Although the description is not very detailed, it is evident that only unbelievers will appear at this judgment. John writes, “Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them” (Revelation 20:11). According to David MacLeod, the word ‘great’ indicates the “grandeur of its authority” while the word ‘white’ “points up the purity and complete and invincible justice of the One who sits on it.”⁴⁶ The One who sits on this throne is the same One in front of whom believers will stand, the

⁴³ Samuel L. Hoyt, "The judgment seat of Christ in theological perspective." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137, no. 546 (April 1, 1980): 126.

⁴⁴ Hoyt, *The judgment seat of Christ in theological perspective*, 128.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ MacLeod, *Last thing*, 318.

Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 17:31).⁴⁷ At this point, it will be too late for one to change his or her decision for Christ, for at this point his or her decision will already have been made.

The Great White Throne Judgment has been reserved for the wicked. Individuals will be “judged according to their works” (Revelation 20:12, 13). The judgment will be based upon all the sinful deeds one committed while living on the earth. “The main test on the day of judgment will be whether one's name is in the Book of Life. The names of all those who have embraced Christ as their Savior are listed in that book.”⁴⁸ Those who have never embraced Christ will be cast into “lake of fire” (Revelation 20:14). However, this lifetime provides opportunity for one to prepare for the eternity that awaits.

A Practical Understanding of Ones Eternal Destination

Following the final judgment, one will experience either eternal joy or eternal misery. Those who made a decision to receive God’s plan of salvation and stood at the Judgment Seat of Christ, will one day experience the joy of heaven. In a nonchalant way, people will often say, “This is like heaven” or compare heaven to earthly things. Mortal man is the pinnacle of God’s creation and although mortal man is unique, the finite mind simply cannot comprehend the beauty of heaven. Scripture records the account of the Apostle Paul who received a vision of heaven. Although he received a glimpse of heaven, he was not permitted to reveal the vision (II Corinthians 12:2-4). However, the Apostle John revealed some details about heaven that surely capture one’s attention.

Heaven will be a place of pure beauty. Scripture provides much insight as to what believers can look forward. “In Revelation 21:3-4, John continues to describe a most glorious picture. John

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

not only sees a new heaven, a new earth, and a New Jerusalem but also hears a loud voice.”⁴⁹

The landscape of heaven will include gates of pearls, walls of jasper, and streets of gold. This vision normally comes to mind when one speaks of heaven. The physical appearance and reality will truly be remarkable. However, the most glorious sight will be Jesus Christ. John goes onto to explain, “But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light” (Revelation 21:22-23). Humans will finally be able to experience the ultimate reality of both the physical presence of heaven and the beauty of the light, the Lord Jesus Christ. For believers will finally see Him as He is, face to face.

Heaven is also a place where the pains and cares of this life will no longer exist. John goes on to explain that, “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away” (Revelation 21:3-4). There will be a great transformation and the saints of God will finally receive a new glorified body (I Corinthians 15:12-17). “This transformation will have endless joy, peace, and life as its fruits, because when the first things—the old order—have passed away, all suffering, tears, and even death itself will be ended.”⁵⁰ All sorrows believers now face will one day be replaced with eternal joy unspeakable, full of glory (I Peter 1:8). Therefore, death for the believer is not something to fear. Death is the doorway that takes the believer from the

⁴⁹ Carol J. Dempsey, "Revelation 21:1-8." *Interpretation* 65, no. 4 (October 1, 2011): 401.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

current reality of life on earth to the reality of eternity in heaven. "Death is the "blessed event" allowing us to return to the homeland."⁵¹

Heaven will be a beautiful place and the believer should anxiously await the homecoming. However, the opposite is true of hell. Hell is a place of utter darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Luke 13:28). One of the most convincing proofs in Scripture that helps one understand the reality of hell is the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Scripture explains the reality of the rich man's condition. "And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom" (Luke 16:23). Luke provides a snapshot of the eternal reality of hell. The man was experiencing torment in Hades and so will it be the case in the eternal lake of fire. The rich man was well aware of what was he was experiencing. Not only was he filled with anguish, the rich man "could see, hear, and speak. He could feel. He could reason, and, above all, he could remember."⁵²

The reality of what the rich man experienced compelled him to do whatever he could to prevent his relatives from having to experience this same eternal torment. Luke explains, "Then he said, 'I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment'" (Luke 16:27). Firsthand, this man experienced "the second death, that is, conscious existence in the lake of fire. For this there is no remedy."⁵³

⁵¹ Allan J. McNicol, "All Things New." *Christian Studies Journal* 21, (January 2005): 54.

⁵² John Phillips, *The John Phillips Commentary Series – Exploring the Gospel of Luke: An Expository Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2005).

⁵³ MacLeod, *Last thing*, 325.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, an individual's eternal destiny is based upon the decision he or she makes in this life. The decision is based on what one does with the person of Christ. Jesus Christ died on Calvary's cross to pay the penalty for humanity's sin and to offer abundant life, both now and forever (John 10:10). The decision one makes in this life concerning God's plan of salvation, has far-reaching eternal effects. Those "who have come to know and love the triune God in this life will surely know and love the divine Persons in the next."⁵⁴ When one approaches the subject from this perspective (life being short and God having a better plan), one is able to grasp the bigger picture of heaven and hell. Jesus' death on the cross would have been in vain if the promise of eternal life were nothing more than a myth. From a biblical perspective, the ultimate reality of a dualistic view concerning heaven and hell becomes even clearer. One must keep in mind that life is short and a final judgment is imminent for all. Eternity awaits and every human being is just a heartbeat away from the end of this life and the beginning of eternity.⁵⁵ Will it be eternity in heaven or in hell? Each individual must decide. Choose Christ today. Choose life!

⁵⁴ Joseph A. Bracken, "Salvation: A Matter of Personal Choice." *Theological Studies* 37, no. 3 (September 1976): 416.

⁵⁵ Mark Cahill, *One Heartbeat Away*. Rockwall, Texas: BDM Publishing, 2005.

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