

13. Heaven and Hell in the 21st Century as Taught by Christ and the Apostles

This is the final lesson of this series comparing the teaching of Christ and the apostles in the 1st century to the teaching of sectarians and denominationalists in the 21st century. The following is a short summary of the belief of various groups about heaven and hell. This material relies heavily on the online, free encyclopedia, Wikipedia. There are almost no references to the specific teachings of Jesus and the apostles in the representation of these doctrinal viewpoints.

What 21 Century Sectarians and Denominationalists Teach

The Roman Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church bases its belief in Heaven on some main biblical passages from the Old and New Testaments and from the books of the apocrypha and from collected church wisdom. Heaven is the Realm of the Blessed Trinity, the Blessed Virgin Mary (also called the Queen of Heaven), the angels and the saints. According to the dogma of Assumption of the Virgin Mary, the Virgin Mary, "having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory." This implies that heaven must have some facility to support human bodies, as well as souls, or that the experience of heaven is to be understood as a spiritual (soul) experience while still on earth.

The essential joy of heaven is called the beatific vision, which is derived from the vision of God's essence. The soul rests perfectly in God, and does not, or cannot desire anything else than God. After the Last Judgment, when the soul is reunited with its body, the body participates in the happiness of the soul. It becomes incorruptible, glorious, and perfect. Any physical defects the body may have labored under are erased.

The Roman Catholic teaching regarding Heaven is in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Upon dying, each soul goes to what is called "the particular judgment" where its own afterlife is decided (i.e. Heaven after Purgatory, straight to Heaven, or Hell.) This is different from "the general judgment" also known as "the Last judgment" which will occur when Christ returns to judge all the living and the dead.

Roman Catholics commonly believe that St. Michael the Archangel carries the soul to Heaven. They believe that Saint Peter meets the soul at the "Pearly Gates," an artistic application of the belief that Christ gave Peter, believed by Catholics to be their first Pope, the keys to Heaven.

Protestant Christianity

The intermediate state (between death and the resurrection) is unclear in Protestant Christian thought, but the following may be generally concluded about the eternal life that Jesus promised those who believed in him:

Biblical authors apply the term Heaven to the realm in which God currently resides. Eternal life, however, occurs in a renewed, unspoiled and perfect creation, which can be termed Heaven, since God will choose to dwell there permanently with his people (Revelation 21:3). There will no longer be any separation between God and man. The believers themselves will exist in incorruptible, resurrected, and new bodies; there will be no sickness, no death, and no tears. Not only will the believers spend eternity with God, they will also spend it with each other. John's vision, recorded in Revelation, describes a New Jerusalem which comes from Heaven to the new earth, which is seen to be a symbolic reference to the people of God living in community with one another. *Heaven* will be the place where life will be lived to the full, in the way that the designer planned. All believers will love the Lord their God with all their hearts and with all their souls and with all their minds. They will love their neighbor as themselves (Matthew 22:37-38) – a place of great joy, without the negative

aspects of earthly life.

Seventh-day Adventists

Seventh-day Adventists believe that heaven is a material place where God resides. They believe that Christ promises to return as a Saviour at which time He will resurrect the righteous dead and gather them along with the righteous living to heaven. The unrighteous will die at Christ's second coming. After Christ's second coming, there will exist a period of time known as the Millennium, during which Christ and His righteous saints will reign and the unrighteous will be judged. At the close of the Millennium, Christ and His angels return to earth to resurrect the dead that remain, to issue the judgments and to rid forever the universe of sin and sinners. On the new earth, in which righteousness dwells, God will provide an eternal home for the redeemed and a perfect environment for everlasting life, love, joy, and learning in His presence. It is at this point that heaven is established on the new earth.

Jehovah's Witnesses

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that Jesus' death was necessary to atone for the sin brought into the world by the first man, Adam, opening the way for the hope of everlasting life for mankind, and that 144,000 people will receive immortal life in heaven as co-rulers with Christ. They and Christ will rule over the rest of mankind during the Millennial Reign. Witnesses believe that during the imminent war of Armageddon, the wicked will be destroyed, and the survivors, along with millions of others who will be resurrected. These will form a new earthly society ruled by a heavenly government, and they will have the possibility of living forever in an earthly paradise. The vast majority of Jehovah's Witnesses expect to live on a renewed paradise on Earth.

Latter-Day Saints

The view of heaven according to the Latter-day Saint's movement is based on Section 76 of the Doctrine and Covenants. The afterlife is divided first into two levels until the Last Judgment; afterwards it is divided into four levels, the upper three of which are referred to as "degrees of glory" that, for illustrative purposes, are compared to heavenly bodies. Before the Last Judgment, spirits separated from their bodies at death go either to Paradise or to Spirit Prison, based on their merits earned in life. Paradise is a place of rest, while its inhabitants continue learning in preparation for the Last Judgment. Spirit Prison is a place of anguish and suffering for the wicked and unrepentant; however, missionary efforts done by spirits from Paradise enable those in Spirit Prison to repent, accept the Gospel and the atonement and receive baptism through the practice of baptism for the dead. After the resurrection and Last Judgment, people are sent to one of four levels:

The *Celestial Kingdom* is the highest level, with its power and glory comparable to the sun. Here, faithful and valiant disciples of Christ who accepted the fullness of His Gospel and kept their covenants with Him through following the prophets of their dispensation, are reunited with their families and with God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit for all eternity. Men and women who have entered into celestial marriage are eligible, under the tutelage of God the Father, to eventually become gods and goddesses as joint-heirs with Jesus Christ.

The *Terrestrial Kingdom's* power and glory is comparable to that of the moon, and is reserved for those who understood and rejected the full Gospel in life but lived good lives; those who did accept the Gospel but failed to keep their covenants through continuing the process of faith, repentance, and service to others; those who "died without law" (D & C 76:72) but accepted the full Gospel and repented after death due to the missionary efforts undertaken in Spirit Prison. God the Father does not come into the Terrestrial Kingdom, but Jesus Christ visits them and the Holy Spirit is given to them.

The *Telestial Kingdom* is comparable to the glory of the stars. Those placed in the Telestial Kingdom suffered the pains of Hell after death because they were liars, murderers, adulterers, whoremongers,

etc. They are eventually rescued from Hell by being redeemed through the power of the atonement at the end of the Millennium. Despite its far lesser condition in eternity, the Telestial Kingdom is described as being more comfortable than Earth in its current state.

Perdition, or outer darkness, is the lowest level and has no glory whatsoever. It is reserved for Satan, his angels, and those who have committed the unpardonable sin. The only known son of Perdition is Cain, but it is generally acknowledged that there are probably more scattered through the ages.

What Jesus and the Apostles Taught in the 1st Century

Bible concepts of heaven and hell are straightforward. Jesus related eternal life to belief and the resurrection in John 6:40, "40 For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." He also taught that those with eternal life would never perish in John 10:28, "28 I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand." This eternal life was central to the purpose of God, according to Paul in Rom 6:23, "23 For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The Righteous and Wicked Separated For Ever and Ever

In Matt 25 Jesus described the separation of righteous and wicked. In Matt 25:31-34, 41, he taught:

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

41 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

Disaster Awaits the Wicked

Paul also described the disaster that will confront the wicked in 2 Thess 1:6-10:

6 God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you 7 and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. 8 He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power 10 on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed.

The Righteous Will Be Changed

The *how* of the transition to heaven is clearly taught in 1 Thess 4:13-17:

13 Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. 14 We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. 15 According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

In 1 Cor 15:42-44, 50, Paul showed how flesh and blood will not be in heaven:

42 So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; 43 it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; 44 it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.

50 I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

Eternity Awaits the Both Righteous and the Wicked

There is in the teaching of Jesus and the apostles an eternal home of the wicked and an eternal home of the righteous. Rev 21:6-8 separates the eternal fate of the believers and the unbelieving:

6 He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. 7 He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son. 8 But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars – their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."

In Rev 22:14-15 describes those who enter the heavenly city:

14 "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. 15 Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

The Heavenly Home of the Righteous Is Perfect and For Ever and Ever

The heavenly home of the righteous is perfect and for ever and ever Rev 22:1-5:

22:1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. 3 No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. 4 They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

Conclusion

Each of the 21st century groups that we have studied, take their authority from themselves. The Roman Catholics have their traditions and church dogma. The Protestants have the creeds, disciplines, and manuals, the findings of their councils and conventions. The Seventh Day Adventists have the writings of Ellen G White and the pronouncements of their General Conference. The Jehovah's Witnesses have the teachings of Charles Taze Russell and Joseph Franklin Rutherford. The Latter Day Saints have the Book of Mormon and their *Doctrine and Covenants*. All of these add to the plain teaching of the New Testament. All mankind should pay close attention to the Revelation of Christ where one finds all one needs to know about heaven and hell. That Revelation closes after describing heaven and hell with these words in Rev 22:14-20:

14 "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. 15 Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

16 "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and

the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star."

17 The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.

18 I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. 19 And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

20 He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon."

Study Questions from the Scriptures

1. John 6:40: What did God promise those who believe on the Son?
2. John 10:28: What does Christ give us? When will Christians perish?
3. Rom 6:23: What is the gift of God? What are the wages of sin?
4. Matt 25:31-34: When Christ comes where will he be sitting? Who will be on the right? The left? What is the reward for the blessed of the Father? To where will the cursed go?
5. 2 Thess 1:6-10: Who will Jesus punish? With what shall they be punished?
6. 1 Thess 4:13-17: Who will come with Jesus? What will the Lord's coming be like? Where will we be forever?
7. 1 Cor 15:42-44, 50: What can not inherit the kingdom of God? What are our resurrected selves like?
8. Rev 21:6-8: What will happen to those who overcome? What will happen to the sinners?
9. Rev 22:14-15: Who are blessed? What will they receive? Who are those outside?
10. Rev 22:1-5: Figuratively speaking, what will heaven be like?
11. Rev 22:14-20: What do the Spirit and bride say? What will happen to those who take away from the words of this prophecy? What will happen to those who add to the words of this prophecy?