

“What Are Heaven and Hell?”

Tough Questions, part #3

Luke 16:19-31

[title slide] You are in the right place this morning. You are not here by accident. We appreciate you, and we are here to worship God with you. Your presence matters to us and to God. Let’s give God thanks for bringing us together this morning.

Would you please pray with me? Lord, if you have something to tell us this morning, we are ready to listen. Look through us, test our hearts, show us anything about ourselves we need to change, and show us your eternal way. Amen.

[cherubs] 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.

We see a lot images of heaven and hell in pop culture, movies and commercials. Angels with wings. Devils with horns, a tail, and cloven feet. I’ve never seen those descriptions in the Bible. Part of the reason that I chose this topic for today is, I’d rather learn about heaven and hell from the Bible than from a screen.¹

[lady with angel and devil] Now, I don’t usually preach about heaven and hell. I tend to stick to topics based on my experiences. I don’t know much about heaven and hell because, obviously, I’m not dead yet! So I cannot tell you for sure what the afterlife looks like.

I do find it very interesting that every culture has some doctrine of heaven and hell. These are not just Christian ideas. Instinctively, a part of us admits, this life is not all there is. Most everyone on earth believes when our earthly lives end, we go somewhere, and that destination has something to do with our behavior and choices in this life. No matter what religion you study, this belief exists.

[man eternity] I have a theory. I believe that God himself has put the desire for eternity in our hearts. That’s why I want to talk about heaven and hell

¹ Check out this Halo Top ice cream commercial: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bXnM5T7cmdc>

today. Most people just want to talk about heaven. I contend you can't just believe in one eternal destination; if you believe in one, you ought to believe in both.

[scriptures] So let's look briefly at what the Bible teaches about the afterlife, starting with hell. It may surprise you to know that there is no consistent description of hell in the Bible. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word, Sheol, is used to describe 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)

[New Testament words] In the New Testament, there are three words commonly translated as hell: Hades, Tartarus, and Gehenna. Hades and Tartarus originate in Greek mythology. Gehenna, however, refers to a literal dump in the valley outside of Jerusalem where people burned their trash. Obviously, no matter what you call it, hell, as described in the New Testament, is a nasty place.

[starry sky] Heaven is what we really want to talk about. You may be surprised to know that heaven as we imagine it is not mentioned in the Old Testament at all. There are “the heavens,” as in, the sky, where the sun, moon, and stars appear. However, as a destination for your soul, the Hebrew Bible offers no direct references. There are a few suggestions and allegories – the Garden of Eden, for example – but most of the time, when the Old Testament describes eternity, the writers depict the joy of being in God's presence, not a location. (Psalm 16, 23, and 73, Isaiah 26:19, for example).

[Jesus teaching] In the New Testament heaven takes the main stage. In fact, many of Jesus' teachings display 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) In Jesus' time, people did believe in eternal life, and many of them wanted to know from Jesus what heaven was like. Even

the first message Jesus preached was, “The kingdom of heaven has come near!” (Mark 1:15.) Finally, in the book of Revelation, we read about God’s throne, light, beauty, and heavenly beings surrounding God in worship.

There is no single description of heaven or hell in the Bible, but rather, a variety of images. And although we don’t know all the details, we do affirm in the Christian church that heaven and hell are actual places.

[Rich man and Lazarus, Luke 16] Rather than examining all those references I just mentioned, I want to focus on Luke 16, Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus the beggar. It might be uncomfortable. I’m not convinced this scripture is a literal description of heaven and hell. However, this parable clearly tells us our actions have eternal consequences.

In the parable, Jesus explains the rich man practiced selfishness. He literally stepped over Lazarus every day, completely ignoring the beggar while indulging in expensive clothing and 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. Jesus emphasizes the contrast of the two characters. 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.

[scripture] First of all, this parable is not about moralism. This is not a lesson that “good people go to heaven and bad people go to hell.” No, this parable is a warning. What does the rich man say? “Let Lazarus go to my brothers and warn them.” (Luke 16:27-28) In hell, the rich man finally realized that his choices matter for eternity.

It is no coincidence that Jesus never names the rich man. On earth, the rich man was famous. Everyone knew him and had an opinion about him. Yet, in the afterlife, the man is anonymous. I believe Jesus is teaching, “This rich man could be any of us.”

Speaking through the figure of Abraham, Jesus explains there is enough information for people to know God’s will and avoid the rich man’s agony. He says, “They have all of Moses and the prophets.” (Luke 16:29) In other words, the

scriptures to tell us how to receive eternal life, regardless of what we think heaven or hell actually looks like.

[scripture] Sadly, some people still reject the truth. Through Abraham, Jesus concludes, “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) This is an unmistakable reference to Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection.

So while this parable gives glimpses of heaven and hell, at its core, it is really about choices and 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 and to act on it.

[Jesus, hands] So here is what I believe about heaven and hell, based on the whole picture of scripture, from Genesis to Revelation: Heaven is a place where everyone worships God. In hell, no one worships God. In heaven, the saints rejoice in God’s presence, walk in his light, and drink from his stream of life. In hell, Jesus tells us, people curse, weep, mourn, and gnash their teeth in anger and regret. Hell is a place where one realizes what was lost.

[Hope for all] There is one other idea that I offer in light of this conclusion. It is possible, even in death, Jesus still pursues those who never decided to follow and worship him in this life. 1st Peter 3:19 says, “[Christ] went and preached to the spirits in prison...” Ephesians 4:9 says, “he also descended into the lower regions, the earth...” And 1st Peter 4:6 says, “For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, though they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit as God does.” I believe Jesus cares just as much for those in hell as he does for those in heaven and on earth.

[cross] I will never tell someone they are destined for heaven or hell. That is not my job. It is God who gives us a choice, to believe in Jesus and accept his grace and salvation, and that is something we all can choose in this life. Hell is not a punishment for failing a test, and heaven is not reward for “good people.” The real question is, do you want to worship God forever? If you do, heaven has already come to you, because the Son of God, Jesus, is alive and present already in this world, and we worship him today. Our goal, as the Church he established, is to help others love and follow 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. For today, it is enough to understand that we always have a choice to follow Jesus or not. Heaven and hell, whatever they literally look like, are poignant reminders of that choice.

Someday, I'll ask God, “What about those who lived before Jesus? What about those who never heard of Jesus?” For now, I have to be content that I do not know. Instead, I trust God, because God is both loving and just. I trust God has those answers and will reveal them in his time.

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 invite others to follow Jesus, too.

[title slide] Heaven and hell are real, but mysterious. I suggest we focus on what we do know: become a disciple of Jesus. Our choices in this life matter very much. But only God knows what is inside of someone's heart. If you trust Jesus and follow Him, the kingdom of heaven will come to you, right now. That's Jesus' promise to us, and I hope you believe it.

Let's pray.

Memory verse: Matthew 4:17 (NIV)

From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

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?