



1 Corinthians 15:50-58
Believe
Eternity

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Well, if last week's topic on money and what to do with it is one that we're tempted not to bring up at the dinner table with friends and extended family with whom you want to stay friends and family... then today's topic – or at least half of it – is maybe even more challenging. And as we continue our “Believe” series that is looking at some of the core beliefs of the Christian faith, using the “Believe” book as our outline, we come today to the topics of heaven and hell as we answer the question: What happens in eternity, after a person dies?

There are several different interpretations and understandings of the Bible's depiction of both heaven and hell, but maybe especially about hell. There seems to be more ardent disagreement over the centuries about hell than there is about heaven, which is kind of interesting because that means followers of Jesus are arguing more about what we believe Jesus saves us *from*, rather than what we're going to *experience* because of his saving. The one thing (or the main thing, at least) that all Christian understandings of eternity have in common is that hell is separation from God, and heaven is in the presence of God, in relationship with Him, and Jesus is the key to it all. We might summarize a belief about eternity with this brief statement: **“I believe there is a heaven and a hell and that Jesus will return to judge all people and to establish his eternal kingdom.”**

Jesus talked a lot about eternity – both the good and the bad. He told a number of parables about it, and from his teaching and other passages in Scripture, we can learn a lot about eternity. One of the things we learn is that eternal life with God sounds a whole lot better than the other option. For instance, in the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus says: “When the Son of Man [speaking of himself] comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. 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. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. 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...’

“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...’

“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life” (Matthew 25:31-34, 41, 45). Jesus does not, here, address the question of “where are these eternal locations” and he doesn't call them by name here, either; but: **He does give the very real depiction that eternity is a conscious state of being – one of eternal**

punishment, the other of eternal life. And this is what we see throughout his teaching on this subject.

That parable is probably the backdrop for a story I read recently. On the outskirts of a small town, there was a big old pecan tree by the cemetery fence. One day two boys gathered up a bucketful of nuts and sat down by the tree, out of sight, and began dividing the nuts. "One for you, one for me. One for you, one for me," said one boy. Several were accidentally dropped and rolled down toward the fence, to be gathered and divided later.

Another boy came riding along the road on his bicycle. As he passed, he thought he heard voices from inside the cemetery. He slowed down to investigate. Sure enough, he heard, "One for you, one for me. One for you, one for me." "Oh my," the boy shuddered, "it's Satan and God dividing the souls at the cemetery." He jumped back on his bike and rode off.

Just around the corner he met an old man with a cane, hobbling along. "Come here quick," said the boy, "you won't believe what I heard. Satan and God are down at the cemetery dividing up the souls." The man said, "Beat it, kid, can't you see it's hard for me to walk." When the boy insisted, though, the man hobbled to the cemetery.

Standing by the fence they heard, "One for you, one for me. One for you, one for me..." The old man whispered, "Oh boy! You've been tellin' the truth. Let's see if we can see the devil himself." Shaking with fear, they peered through the fence, yet were still unable to see anything. The old man and the boy gripped the wrought iron bars of the fence tighter and tighter as they tried to get a glimpse of Satan. At last they heard, "One for you, one for me, and one last one for you. That's all. Now let's go get those nuts by the fence, and we'll be done." The old man who could previously hardly walk, high-tailed it back to town 5 minutes faster than the boy on his bike!¹ I don't want to perpetuate misunderstandings of Scripture, and the story isn't really Biblically accurate: One thing the story gets wrong is that God is the righteous and holy judge, not Satan. God is the one who is Lord of everything seen and unseen. He's the one you want to get right with and be in relationship with.

Now, there is a particular word that Jesus uses to talk about hell: Gehenna. Not all of his teaching on the topic contains the word, such as that parable of the sheep and goats. But when he uses a word to speak of what we think of as hell, he used the word "Gehenna." **Gehenna was a valley outside of Jerusalem that had a few different names for it, including Ben Hinnom, or the Valley of Hinnom, and Tophet.** Jews from different times throughout the Old Testament, when they were apostate and not following Yahweh, went into this valley to worship the pagan god Molech – in fact, for a time there was an idol of Molech there that they would bow down to in worship. And

sometimes they would even practice child sacrifice, burning them in the arms of the idol of Molech. We read about this in 2 Kings 23:10, for instance, when Josiah, the Jewish king who reigned from about 640 B.C. to 609 B.C., went into this valley to stop people from sacrificing their children in the arms of the idol, and to stop the idol worship.

Because of Josiah's stand against them some 650 years before Jesus' teachings, Molech worship and the sacrificial burnings in Gehanna stopped. Now, if you've ever heard that the Gehanna valley then became Jerusalem's garbage dump, where the garbage was burned night and day in sort of an on-going, constant smolder, that *seems* to be false. The first mention of this is by a Jewish scholar in 1200 A.D.; there's no biblical or any other historical recording of this, and no archaeological evidence either. That's not proof that it *didn't* happen, but it doesn't seem to have happened. Regardless, some people suggest that when Jesus uses "Gehanna" or "the fires of Gehanna" he didn't really mean it as "hell" as we think of it, as an eternal destination, but that he was just referencing this place outside Jerusalem as an appropriate metaphor for separation from God, or punishment, or bad consequences.

However, in the decades leading up to Jesus' ministry, Jewish rabbis began using the word Gehanna to describe what you and I would call "hell" – as an eternal destination. An actual "place" in the spiritual realm. There is a certain degree of continuity as Gehanna goes from a terrible place of child sacrifice and worship of a false god with various burnt offerings to a word used to describe hell as we think of it. Both have to do with turning our backs on God in sin, committing idolatry, and worshipping a false god. And it makes sense that Jesus, as a Jewish rabbi, would be using "Gehanna" not just as a metaphor, but in the sense that the Jewish rabbis of his day used it: as a word to describe "hell" as we think of it, as an eternal consequence for our sin, with this horrible imagery of burning sacrifices to a false god, and perhaps also burning of garbage, as the picture of what hell is like.ⁱⁱ Regardless, nothing about Gehanna, however the word was used over the centuries, is positive. It had a despicable history and place in their culture.

And every time Jesus uses this word – and he does so on 6 or 7 separate occasionsⁱⁱⁱ – **Every time he uses the word "Gehanna," He teaches that it is a place we want to avoid at all cost.** For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, he says that it is better to cut off your hand or gouge out your eye if they cause you to sin, rather than to end up in fires Gehanna with your eyes and your hands intact. So the idea of hell is not something construed by Christians over the centuries: Jesus himself teaches on it quite frequently.

Then of course, we also see depictions of hell, as well as heaven, in the book of Revelation. Not that Jesus' teaching and Revelation are the only places in the Bible we see teaching on eternity, but they're the two most significant. And as you may know: **The Revelation depictions are some of the most vivid pictures of hell – and of**

heaven. There's crazy stuff about beasts with multiple heads, a city prepared as a bride for her groom, with a river flowing through it and a tree whose roots span to both sides of the river, a lake of fire...I mean there's a lot of vivid imagery about eternity, even if we aren't always entirely sure what everything really looked like in this vision that John had. Regardless, there's this image of eternal fires that is continued here in Revelation, just as Jesus taught on the fires of Gehenna, and the clear message that hell is not where you want to be.

Now, for those who are skeptical about hell – both Jesus' teaching and the rest of the Biblical teaching on it – personal testimony can be more persuasive. **There are a number of people who experienced hell in what are usually called "Near Death Experiences," though in some cases they did actually die before being revived, and many of them did not believe hell existed before their experience.** (In other words: it's not just their sub consciousness in the moment before death playing out something they believe in.) Let me share with you the true story of Matthew Botsford. Here's a portion of what he writes:

"I did not know Jesus. He was not my Lord and Savior. I believed there was a God and that Jesus existed, but I had no intimate relationship with Him. Therefore, upon my death on that terrifying night, Hell was my final destination. It was March of 1992 when, on the streets of Atlanta, Georgia, and waiting on a taxi, that I physically died from a 9 mm bullet to my head...Nine-millimeter shots rang out from every direction. The shooter stood on the corner of the cracked concrete sidewalk. He squeezed the trigger of an UZI machine gun, anger pumping through his veins, spraying bullets into the crowd outside of the building.

I felt an incredibly painful hot pierce in to the top right rear of my skull and a scorching searing pain into and through my very brain where the bullet came to rest in my right frontal lobe (It remains there to this day).

Immediately, I shifted from the temporal realm I lived in, to the eternal realm of Hell. I saw myself experientially (meaning it was actually myself as opposed to viewing myself from an outside vantage point) in bodily form suspended crucifixion style in midair in the blackness of Hell, arms outstretched, shackled with ancient black chains clasped about my wrists and my ankles, suspending me over a deep seemingly bottomless glowing red abyss.

This chasm was contained inside of a massive cavernous dome, underground cave-like with [...a...] blackish-red jagged dome-like ceiling and their floor [with tall, pointy rocks] rising from the rough flowing glowing floor as what seemed to be lava flowed about them, encircling their bases and rising to the tip-top of some. It was obvious, by the countless screams I heard, I was not down there alone, yet isolated, I was in my own

torment.

Hopelessness squashed my existence. I saw dark oval eyes looking at me...piercing eyes that gazed right into my very being as if they were reading my whole life story...evaluating me, judging me, and mocking me on all counts. I watched countless numbers of these evil eyes dart back and forth at lightning speed. I felt their gaze at my backside and then the peeling off of my skin resulting in tremendous pain. I heard the sound of my skin being ripped off in ribbon-like fashion.

[Then] I saw a massive finger begin to protrude in from the outside which led into the entirety of a man's hand. A right hand cracked and creviced like the palm of any man's hand, yet of great age and massive in appearance. This hand of God methodically descended towards me and grasped me about my waist, instantaneously causing the shackles to drop off, demons to flee, blackness, fear and hopelessness to be vanquished; heavenly music, brilliant white light, and finely ingrained glistening golden white feathers filled the vast cavernous area.

Then the most astounding thing took place. I heard a voice of thunder, a bolt of lightning and mighty rushing waters, simply say; "IT'S NOT YOUR TIME!"^{iv} Matthew later recovered – obviously! – and has lived to tell of his experience. One outcome (and I don't mean this irreverently) is that this experience scared the hell out of him: Matthew and his wife became Christians because of this experience. They follow Jesus to this day, sharing their testimony of what he experienced.

Contrast that experience with the one that Colton Burpo had when he was in a coma in a hospital, and nearly died. Some of you are familiar with his true story from the book or the movie that was made of it as well, called "Heaven is For Real." Of course, this isn't the only testimony of a visit to eternity in heaven, but it's a pretty remarkable one. And during his hospital stay and his near-death experience, when he was like 3 or 4 years old, Colton experienced heaven. God gave him a vision and ushered him into heaven where he saw people he'd never heard of and never met but was able to tell his parents about them afterwards; he had a vivid picture of what eternity with God looks like, of what Jesus looks like.

In fact, a while after his experience Colton saw a television news piece about a girl (Akiane) who beginning at age 3 or so, was getting visions from God, and then drawing them, and as she got older, painting them. And she was from an atheist family, reminding us that God can break through to us in all kinds of circumstances...and she drew a picture of Jesus from one of her visions, that she titled, "Prince of Peace." Her parents were completely mystified by all of this because spiritual conversations were not a part of their family. And yet this was happening to her, and she would draw and paint what she saw in her visions. Her artistic abilities are amazing, and she began to be

known as an art prodigy, and so a news piece was done about her. And when Colton saw on television this picture that she painted, he told his parents: *That's* Jesus. That's what Jesus looked like in his visit to heaven. (They'd looked at many other renditions of Jesus people had painted/drawn, and he said none of them were how Jesus looks.) This is a four-foot tall painting she did at age 8. She is in fact, a total art prodigy: this painting is amazing. And Colton said: That's what Jesus looks like in heaven. (In case you're not sure: Jesus is the male figure, the girl is Akiane, at an older age. 😊)^v



And so what we see in Scripture and in people's experiences is that Jesus makes all the difference. **As we read in today's passage: The sting of death is swallowed up; We are clothed in imperishability, the mortal is clothed with immortality.** We have eternal victory through faith in Jesus Christ. Much like the language to describe hell, the language to describe heaven uses earthly images and references...things we can understand. But eternity really is beyond description. When the movie of Colton Burpo's experience was released he said in an interview that the way they depicted heaven in the movie is accurate...but it's even better. We just can't fully capture here on earth what heaven is like.

But the one thing that's central to eternity in heaven is Jesus. He's the key to heaven. He says so himself. He says that in His Father's house (metaphor for heaven; sometimes translated "mansion," though the Greek word "oikos" is the normal word for "house"), are many rooms, and that Jesus goes and prepares a place for us, and that he will come back and lead us into that house (John 14:1-6). But we have to follow Him, and that starts here and now.

This week I came across a cute thought from someone who said that on people's lists of "The 100 Things To Do Before You Die," ("bucket list") no one ever lists, "Yell for help!" I thought that was pretty funny. Unfortunately, "Follow Jesus" oftentimes isn't on those lists, either. And yet Jesus is the key to the Kingdom of eternity with our Creator, and He invites you and me to follow him in this life and right into eternity, where we spend it with Him, in His presence, and experience eternal life. Jesus has paid the price to cover our sins, and we're invited to receive that for ourselves and follow him into the Kingdom of eternal life. How that all happens exactly...what it looks like exactly...that's all in God's hands. Maybe heaven will be 20 inches of fresh snow every day on 40 degree slopes with no avalanche danger - and no chairlift lines. Maybe I'll be surprised and it's country music all the time...or WSU going to the Rose Bowl. I doubt it...but you never know. I do know that: **Sin has no place in the presence of God and His eternal Kingdom, that only Jesus has covered our sin through his death on the**

cross, and that He is the way to eternal life. God has revealed himself to us through Jesus so we can know him and be in relationship with Him here in this life and in the life to come...He's revealed that much to us. He has not revealed everything to us. I for one, am glad for that, even if it leaves us with some questions. I'm happy to let God be God and let him work things out as He sees best. All I know, is that I'm trusting in Jesus for my eternal home, and I hope you are, too.

I invite you to close out this morning's message with this statement of belief about eternity: **"I believe there is a heaven and a hell and that Jesus will return to judge all people and to establish his eternal kingdom."**

ⁱ <https://alphausa.org/alpha-jokes/>.

ⁱⁱ <https://blog.bibleplaces.com/2011/04/fires-of-gehenna-views-of-scholars.html> (This was a really interesting, well-researched blog post that summarizes things well. Here's another good synopsis: <https://www.postost.net/2015/11/was-gehenna-burning-rubbish-dump-does-it-matter>

ⁱⁱⁱ 7 different times the word is used in Matthew, for example, though a couple of them are in the same teaching.

^{iv} <http://afterthewarning.com/religious-reading/heaven-hell-purgatory/my-time-in-hell.aspx>. There are other accounts of people's experiences as well, and all can be found online easily. Many (like Matthew) have written books about their experience as well.

^v <https://art-soulworks.com/pages/about-akiane-kramarik> - If you want to read more about her, go to her website and this bio page.