

ARE WE SO INVOLVED IN THIS
WORLD THAT WE'VE LOST OUR
CONCERN FOR THE NEXT?

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ERIC DENYER

LIVING WITHOUT HEAVEN OR HELL

“IF YOU WERE TO DIE TONIGHT ...”

¶ There was a time when all evangelicals knew how that sentence ended — and understood its importance. ¶ Confronting someone with the issue of his final destiny was a favorite, and effective, evangelistic strategy: “Do you know for sure that you would go to heaven?” ¶ Christians still ask the question — occasionally. Even for many long-time

BY D. A. CARSON

Heaven wheels above you, displaying to you her eternal glories, and still your eyes are on the ground. — Dante Alighieri

We have a homing instinct, a "home detector," and it doesn't ring for earth. That why nearly every society in history except our own instinctively believes in life after death. Like the great mythic wanderers, like Ulysses and Aeneas, we have been trying to get home. Earth just doesn't smell like home. However good a road it is, however good a motel it is, however a good training camp it is, it is not home. Heaven is. — Peter Kreeft

The things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before. — C.S. Lewis

The way to Heaven is ascending; we must be content to travel up hill, though it be hard and tiresome, and contrary to the natural bias of our flesh.

— Jonathan Edwards

There is a land of pure delight,
Where saints immortal reign;
Infinite day excludes the night,
And pleasures banish pain.

— Isaac Watts

What is heaven going to be like? Just as there is a mystery to hell, so there is a mystery to heaven. Yet I believe the Bible teaches that heaven is a literal place. Is it one of the stars? I don't know. I can't even speculate. The Bible doesn't inform us. I

believe that out there in space where there are one thousand million galaxies, each a hundred thousand light years or more in diameter, God can find some place to put us in heaven. I'm not worried about where it is. I know it is going to be where Jesus is. — Billy Graham

That is what mortals misunderstand. They say of some temporal suffering, "No future bliss can make up for it," not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory. And of some sinful pleasure they say "Let me but have this and I'll take the consequences": little dreaming how damnation will spread back and back into their past and contaminate the pleasure of that sin.

—C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*

Fierce and poisonous animals were created for terrifying man, in order that he might be made aware of the final judgment in hell. — John Wesley

The doctrine of hell is not just some dusty, theological holdover from the unenlightened Middle Ages. It has significant social consequences. Without ultimate justice, people's sense of moral obligation dissolves; social bonds are broken. People who have no fear of God soon have no fear of man, and no respect for human laws and authority.

— Chuck Colson

The vague and tenuous hope that God is too kind to punish the ungodly has become a deadly opiate for the consciences of millions. — A.W. Tozer

... Regions of sorrow, doleful
shades, where peace
And rest can never dwell,
hope never comes
That comes to all; but torture
without end ...

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

believers, the reality of heaven and hell has lost its immediacy, its urgency. Our culture trains us to think a great deal about the here and now, and very little about eternity.

For others in our culture who know almost nothing about the Christian heritage, the question is almost useless as a tool of evangelism. The naturalists (who deny any Creator) don't think there is a heaven to be gained and a hell to be shunned. When you die, you die. Others think, vaguely, that whether you call it heaven or Nirvana or whatever doesn't matter: It is simply important to live a pretty good life. That's the best you can do. As for hell — well, it probably doesn't exist, but if it does, I don't expect any of my friends to be there.

A LOST PASSION

Two-thirds of Americans do not believe in the existence of a personal Satan, according to pollster George Barna. More than half of professing Christians are in the same camp. The existence of hell, with its threat of conscious, eternal torment, has proved so repugnant in recent decades that a rising number of evangelical thinkers argue that the Bible really teaches annihilation: that after a time, those who are lost simply cease to exist. That is their eternal punishment.

As for heaven, it scarcely seems to be the passion of the Western church. By and large, we do not join Christians in every age who, homesick for heaven, have cried, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" As a rule, Christians who are persecuted or impoverished or sick think a great deal more about heaven than most of us do. Christians who are well fed, enjoying comfortable homes and relative security, may be tempted to focus so much on their investments, retirement plans, and hobbies that somehow heaven seems alien, or at least remote.

At some level we know that we must all die, unless we belong to the final generation. But when we actually contract a serious illness we expect the medical profession to cure us, and are quite prepared to sue the doctors if they have not been diligent enough or care-

ful enough on our behalf. We hunger for healing, not heaven. We do not deny that heaven is *there*, of course — but do you really want to spend all of eternity sitting around in a white nightshirt playing a silly harp? Of course heaven is surely more than that. But what is it, really? Besides, isn't there a danger of being too fanatical — so heavenly-minded that we are no earthly good?

WHAT IS AT STAKE?

The apostle Paul's view was quite different. At one level, he was profoundly and passionately engaged in *this* life. This active engagement embraced not only his preaching and evangelism, but also his collection of money for the poor in Jerusalem and his pastoral writing. Yet he could write, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men" (1 Cor. 15:19). Clearly he did not see belief in the afterlife as an optional extra for the especially spiritual.

In the context of 1 Corinthians 15 he was even more specific: He insisted that if there is no resurrection that awaits us at the end, there is no good reason to believe in Christ's resurrection — and in that case we are all lost, for "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins" (15:17).

These were not abstract theological points for him, removed from daily life and hard choices. Far from it: When he was incarcerated and uncertain if he would be released or killed, Paul was torn between the two, hard pressed to decide which was more desirable (Phil. 1:20-26). After all, to depart and be with Christ is "better by far" (v. 23), even though he knows that it is better for the church if he remains with them a while longer (v. 24).

Moreover, says Paul to the Corinthians, if there is no final resurrection from the dead, then the hedonists are right, and we should join them in their refrain: "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (15:32). Here is blunt realism: Self-sacrifice and self-denial make no sense if there is no vindication at the end. Likewise, if there is no heaven to be gained nor hell to be feared,

the pursuit of pleasure in this life makes eminent sense.

THE FINAL RECKONING

This perspective makes sense of the last chapter of Job. After all his sufferings, after his discussions with his three miserable "friends," after Elihu's expostulations and God's booming intervention, in chapter 42 Job is vindicated: more children, even greater wealth than before, more honor.

Today's literary critics say that the last chapter spoils the story. They would much prefer to end in moral ambiguity. But chapter 42 is no mistake. In the Bible, God intervenes to vindicate His people at the end. That is why the Book of Revelation encourages us to persevere; it is why the Lord Jesus Himself insists we should be investing heavily in the bank of heaven (Matt. 6:19-21).

In fact, heaven and hell help to establish a Christian world-view. They presuppose that history is going somewhere, that our actions are morally significant, and that on the last day justice will not only be done but that justice will be visible to all.

Contrast this vision of reality with the view that says history just keeps going round and round, without a goal and a final bar of justice. Or consider the view that a lot of bad things "just happen" without anyone taking the consequences. Eventually evil is relativized. I shouldn't be too upset with a Hitler or a Stalin, still less with the evil of my own heart: Each person has his own point of view, and no one has the right to say another is wrong.

But God has that right. And on the last day His voice will be final.

VISIONS OF GLORY OR TORMENT

Remember it is the Lord Jesus who, in the New Testament, has the most to say about hell and employs the most colorful pictures. He is the one who has instructed us not to fear those who can merely kill the body, but to fear him who, "after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell" (Luke 12:5).

Indeed, there is a sense in which the

Bible's most shocking images of an endless hell ("the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever") enable us to glimpse a little more clearly just how ugly and odious sin is in God's sight. Perhaps hell will be a place where men and women go on sinning and being punished without ever once wanting repentance and faith. Meditate long on Rev. 14:6-20, and it becomes difficult ever again to be casual about sin.

But the opposite kind of meditation is even more rewarding. The great glory of the vision of the new heaven and the new earth is that at its center is the One who sits on the throne, and the Lamb (Rev. 21:1-22:5). There is no need there for either temple or light, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are that city's temple and light.

What will we lose? There will be "no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (21:4). Nothing impure will ever enter that abode (21:27), and there will be no more curse (22:3).

What will we gain? All heaven's citizens will see God's face (22:4), and they "will reign for ever and ever" (22:5).

The greatest good of the new heaven and the new earth will be greater than reuniting with long-lost loved ones. It will even surpass the joy of breaking free of the hurts, losses, and death of this life. The greatest joy will be to see God Almighty and the Lamb, to delight utterly in God's glory, to live an everlasting resurrection-life with God at the center of everything, and to find it unimaginably good.

Can Christians — can we — recover these profoundly biblical visions of eternal realities and take them as seriously as we do our lives here on earth? Not, I fear, without spending a lot of time rereading what the Bible says about these things, and thinking hard about them, praying that God would make them central in our lives. ■

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