

## **IS THERE A HEAVEN AND HELL?**

**1 Corinthians 15:20-26**

### **Critical Searching Inquiries Series**

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Today we continue our Critical Searching Inquiries by focusing on the question “Is there a Heaven and Hell?” The irony of this question, I believe, is that many people today whether they are Christians or not seem to believe that there is a heaven of some kind.

I have heard people who have never darkened the door of a church, those who don’t really believe in any kind of god, who freely talk about their loved ones being in heaven looking down on them from above, and who say that this loved one’s spirit is with them.

Just like the increasing numbers of people who celebrate Christmas but not Jesus and his birth, there are many who believe there is some life or some realm beyond this life. In many ways it reflects the fact that we are living in a very spiritually focused time in history—with much of this spirituality being outside the realm of Christianity and the Bible.

The second irony of this question “Is there a Heaven and Hell?” is how so many who would say they don’t believe in such a thing as eternal separation from God, how they are so readily willing to condemn people or tell people to go to hell.

It is interesting how so many use this word or concept in their daily language without batting an eye. Some talk about their work or life as being like “hell,” or how they had that kind of day, or how this whole world can simply go there. Being a religious concept many say they don’t believe is true it is amazing how much they talk about it and use it to accuse others.

One possible psychological explanation is that we as people often joke or talk a lot about that which we fear deep in our souls. Certainly that is one explanation why people often like to dress the devil in red tights with funny horns and have him stand with a pitch fork.

As long as one can make evil into a cartoon like character or can make the picture of hell into a humorous parody they can try to repress their fears. As long as one can damn others to this realm/place—as long as they can use this word to try to prove to business associates that they are tough mouth negotiators then they don’t need to ask whether hell really exists.

So what do we know and believe about heaven and hell? What does the Bible actually teach us? And what do we know about how we actually go to heaven? In a time when there are tons of ideas, and theories, where can we find some answers and understanding?

One of the difficult things, of course, about our understanding of heaven and hell is that it is in a different realm and that we don’t have any eyewitness proof that they exist. To experience this realm one needs to die and those who have died cannot come back to tell us what happens.

Therefore what is needed is faith. To be able to know and understand heaven, and hell, takes faith and trust in Jesus and in the promises of God’s Word. It is as Hebrews 11 states, “*Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.*”

Now it is important I believe to note that even in the New Testament church these same questions and doubts were being raised. For example in 1 Corinthians 15 the Apostle Paul is

lifting up how there are some people at that time who are claiming that there is no resurrection of the dead. There were some who were saying that there is nothing beyond this life.

Paul goes on to lift up that *“if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.”* He points out that *“if Christ has not been raised your faith is futile and you are still in your sins,”* and that *“then those who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.”*

And Paul sums of this section by saying, *“If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all the others.”* In other words, if this message of Jesus that I have been preaching all these years and upon which this church is built is not true then we deserve pity.

Ah but the Apostle Paul goes on to say in verse 20, *“But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.”* Then he proclaims these powerful words near the end of this passage, *“Listen, I tell you a mystery.*

*“We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.”*

And then Paul concludes these powerful words, *“Death is swallowed up in victory. ‘Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law, but thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

The Apostle Paul proclaimed with all his faith and confidence that Jesus is God’s Son; that Jesus did die and was raised from the dead, and that Jesus won the victory for all who will believe in him as Savior. It is based on the solid foundation of faith in our eternal God.

Now I know that there are also some popular atheists today who are saying that Jesus could not have risen from the dead. They are arguing that there is no such thing as God or a way anyone can be resurrected from the dead. They say there is no such thing as a spiritual realm called heaven, and that those of us who believe such things are delusional and should be pitied.

I really like the interview type debate in Newsweek some years ago between Rick Warren and popular atheist writer, Sam Harris. I liked where Rick Warren said that even if someone like Harris could prove that Christianity is not true that he would still choose to follow its ways.

Rick Warren has discovered in his life that living according to God’s purposes, and will, fills his life with abundance and joy. Living a life of love and service gives meaning to each day. Following the moral and character guidelines in the Bible brings peace in relationships.

In other words, even if this message of Jesus is not true Rick Warren is saying that we need not be pitied. The reason is because a life of giving, care for others, forgiveness and hope is better than an atheistic life with no unifying compass or purpose.

And then Rick Warren said these words about he and Sam Harris, *“We’re both betting. He’s betting his life that he’s right. I’m betting my life that Jesus was not a liar. When we die, if he’s right, I’ve lost nothing. If I’m right, he’s lost everything. I’m not willing to make that gamble.”*

My friends, I have talked to so many people through the years who feel sorry for me being a pastor; for being a Christian; for giving my life in service for Jesus. And they have also felt sorry for the Christians in my churches—for all the money they have given for mission and buildings; for living lives of conscience focused on things being right or wrong.

And yet the life I know and have experienced in countless numbers of other believers I wouldn't ever trade for their empty purpose or beliefs. And in the end if we are wrong, we have lost nothing. And yet if we are right; if Jesus is "*the way, the truth, and the life,*" and if he is "*the resurrection and the life*" then they have lost everything.

Now here are a couple things that we know for sure about heaven and hell. One is that heaven and hell are not necessarily certain places like in the sky or under the earth. Our God is infinite, beyond a specific place in the clouds and his heaven is greater than anything our finite minds could ever imagine. All our human descriptions can never describe this everlasting wonder.

A second truth is that heaven means being with God and our Savior Jesus forever. It is being in his presence and glory for all eternity. And so on the other hand, hell is really living apart from God forever. In other words the picture of fire and desperation cannot adequately describe this realm. What can be more devastating than living apart from God forever?

A third truth is that our God does not send and he does not want any person to end up in hell. Rather we choose that for ourselves if we refuse his love; if we refuse to believe in him. Jesus died so that all who repent of their sins and commit their lives to him by faith will be saved. It is a gift to be received by faith.

A fourth truth is that we can experience a foretaste of heaven and a foretaste of hell in our lives right now. In fact, there are many today who are truly experiencing lives of hell. They are experiencing it in their addictions to pornography or drugs, in their selfishness and greed, in their lack of purpose and meaning. Many today are living in the depths of hell.

On the other hand there are also those people who are living and experiencing a foretaste of heaven. Now contrary to what some may think this is not experienced by the good life at the lake, on the golf course or living free and easy lives. Some think this American dream is heaven is what heaven is all about but it is not.

The foretaste of heaven on earth is found only as we worship together in true praise and honor to God; as we live in harmony and unite with others centered in Christ's body and blood; as we live each day in mission for Christ. It is when we allow Christ's kingdom and love to come into our lives and our church that we experience a foretaste of heaven.

Eleven years ago on July 18 I was called out of bed in the middle of the night to hear that my father had died. My next older brother, Mark, and I went to pick up my mother and we went to the transitional care center where Dad had been for just a week. Needless to say we were in complete shock because no one had expected him to die at this time.

And yet as we entered Dad's room and as we saw his lifeless body Mark said right away, "Good for you, Dad!" Good for you!" As Dad had lived his life by faith in Jesus and as he had faithfully served Jesus to the end we could proclaim, "Good for you." As this life for Dad was now over--eternal life was his promise and assurance.

My friends, I am concerned about the wishy-washy and sentimental ideas that so many have about heaven. Heaven is God's gift; Jesus has prepared a place for us; and the only way there is through faith and trust in him. May you too invite Jesus into your life today by faith; may you live in confidence that heaven is your future.