

SERMON – 1/13/08

Tough Question #3:

“What does the Bible say about Heaven & Hell?”

What do you get when you give over 200 people the chance to ask any 3 questions they want about God, Faith & the Bible?

- A month-long sermon series called, “Tackling the Tough Questions.”
 - Last week we started with the 4th most asked question: “How do I know when I’m hearing God speak?”
 - Today we’ll tackle tough question #3...
 - But before we do that, we’re going to revisit the other preliminary categories of questions from last week... just for fun!
- First the **Christmas Question...** *“How long did it actually take the magi to reach Bethlehem – other denominations celebrate 3 Kings’ Day & it’s sometime in January?!?”*
 - First of all, how many magi were there? (No, not necessarily 3... the gospel of Matthew doesn’t actually say how many)
 - “Three Kings’ Day,” also known as “Epiphany,” is observed on January 6th in some denominations... and is the culmination of the “12 Days of Christmas.”
 - But that doesn’t mean they arrived 12 days after Jesus was born...
 - In fact, Matthew 2:11 tells us... *“On entering the house, (the magi) saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage.”*
 - Mary & Joseph were no longer camping out in a barn-like manger... they’d moved into some kind of house in Bethlehem.
 - And when did they actually arrive? Many think it was around 2 years after Jesus’ birth... as that was the age of the children King Herod had killed, after the magi failed to report back to him.
- Okay... on to the **Quick Answer Question...**
 - *“What happened to Joseph & Mary after Jesus grew up?”*
 - Well, after age 12, Joseph is never mentioned again in the Bible. We don’t know if he died an early death, or just faded into the background.
 - Mary, on the other hand, figures quite prominently in the Bible... especially during the last week of Jesus’ life.

- In fact, she was there at the cross when Jesus died, and was mentioned as being among the believers who gathered together after Jesus rose from the dead.
- Now for the **Fun Question** of the day...
 - *“What do you think God’s favorite color is?”*
 - Well, I’d like to say BLUE (because that’s my favorite color)... but if I had to guess, I’d say WHITE (and no, not because that’s my last name, either!)...
 - Because I learned in college that in the light spectrum, white is the presence of ALL COLORS – merged into one!
 - (But honestly, the Bible doesn’t say!)
- And finally, the **‘Good Question’ Question**:
 - “Where do animals go when they die?”
 - I don’t know.
 - However, if heaven is anything like the Garden of Eden... there were definitely animals there!

And now, as Casey Casem used to say on American Top 40, “on with our countdown”... the third-most asked question... aka TOUGH QUESTION #3... “What does the Bible say about Heaven & Hell?”

- Let me begin by saying, this is actually not an easy question to answer... because there are so many different elements to take into consideration... but I’ll do my best!
 - To begin with, it might be helpful to start with the question, ‘What happens when we die?’
 - You may be surprised to know that in Judaism, there is no clear understanding or consensus about life after death.
 - The earliest Biblical literature had only vague references to an afterlife...
 - So when we get to the Gospels, we find that the Sadducees, among Jewish religious groups, did not believe in the resurrection. The Sadducees held that the only authoritative scriptures were the Laws of Moses (the first 5 books of the Bible), and they found no reference to the resurrection in these books.
 - Like the Sadducees of Jesus’ day, today some Jews do not believe in the afterlife.
- There are passages that allude to it, however.
 - In the first book of the Bible, Genesis, chapter 2... there is a clear distinction between the body and the breath of life...

- "...then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being." (v.7)
- The 23rd Psalm ends with this... "Surely goodness & mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long." (v.6)
- When Jesus was dying on the cross, one of the criminals hanging next to him said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:43)
- Finally, the biggest evidence of life after death has to be **the resurrection of Jesus**.
 - Jesus' resurrection was meant, by God, to offer clear & compelling proof of the resurrection and our hope for an afterlife!
 - I Corinthians 15:20 says, "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died."
 - I was listening to a workshop from last year's Hawaiian Island Ministries conference, from Bart Campolo... he said that "first fruits" was an agrarian expression...
 - When it was time to harvest crops, a farmer would gather just a few of whatever he was raising... enough to fill a bushel basket... and then take it in to town.
 - This would be the "first fruits" of his harvest... the point was to pique the interests of prospective buyers, as a way of saying, 'If you like this, there's more where this came from!'"
 - Jesus as the first fruits is God's way of saying, "There's more where this came from!" And that message is for us... resurrection is available to everyone, through Jesus!

Next, we'll need to examine what the Bible says about Hell...

- In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word "Sheol" is translated as 'the grave,' 'the Pit,' and 'the depths.'
 - It usually refers just to death. Nothing more.
 - One of the oldest versions of the Bible (*the Septuagint*) was written in Greek... and the Greek word used is "Hades."
 - For the most part, the Jewish understanding of Hades was that it was the holding place for the dead, until the final resurrection at the End of Time.
- As we get into the New Testament, however, the understanding starts to change...

- We see concepts such as hell being eternal punishment... or eternal darkness spent outside the Kingdom of God.
- One of my favorite passages comes from Luke 16... the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus (not the same Lazarus that Jesus raised from the dead in the Gospel of John, however!).
- The story goes like this... There was this rich man who lived ‘the good life’ – nice clothes & rich food!
 - There was also a poor man, covered with sores, who lay at the man’s gate, begging for any scrap of food he could get.
 - The poor man, whose name was Lazarus, died and, as the story goes, he was “carried away by the angels to be with Abraham.”
 - The rich man also died & was buried. But he ended up in Hades.
 - Here’s what he said, once there... *“In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’”* (Luke 16:24)
 - Abraham tells him that the roles of life were reversed in the afterlife... He lived the good life, now he’s in agony... while Lazarus lived in agony, and now God is comforting him.
 - *“Besides all this,”* says Abraham, *“between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.”* (v.26)
 - The rich man then asks if Lazarus would go to his family’s house and warn them to change their ways, lest they end up in Hades like him! But Abraham says they have had Moses & the prophets to warn them... that’s enough.
 - *“No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ Abraham said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses & the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”* (v.30-31)
- In the book of Revelation, Hell is described as a “bottomless pit,” and it’s the place that God ultimately sends the devil at the End of Time!
 - 2 Peter 2:4 comments, *“For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of deepest darkness to be kept until the judgment...”*
 - And Jesus told other parables about people being separated from God & banished into the deepest darkness for all eternity.

- But we need to look at two more passage before we leave the subject of Hell...
 - Ezekiel 33:11... *“As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and life; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?”*
 - I discovered an amazing passage from the book of Job, chapter 33... it’s talking about the end of life, and people heading for Sheol (eternal death)...
 - But if a mediator would come and declare a person “upright”... if the mediator asks that he be delivered from the Pit, then God will allow his soul to be redeemed & that one will not enter Sheol!
 - (As a Christian, I can’t help but read this and think about Jesus!)
- It seems that the aim of the Bible’s teaching on Hell is to warn people & encourage them to walk with God... no matter what Hell may be, it’s a place that no one need to go... nor one that God wishes any to go!

Which leads us to our next section... Judgment Day!

- There are two biblical concepts of Judgment Day...
 - First, that each of us, when we die, will have to give an account for our life... then we’ll be judged by God and sent either to Heaven or to Hell.
 - The other concept is that there will come a day when this world will cease... when the earth will come to an end... and on that day, God will create new heaven & a new earth... and all who have ever lived will be judged by God at this one specific time.
- The Old Testament refers to this as “The Day of the Lord.”
 - Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, from Matthew 5, has teaching after teaching about how to live on earth, so one doesn’t get the short end of the stick on Judgment day.
 - Jesus says, in Matthew 25, in the parable of the sheep and the goats, that we’ll be judged by how we treat others – for that’s how we treat God... being kind, generous, welcoming & concerned for others.
 - Revelation 20:12-15 gets a bit more descriptive:
 - *“And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. And the sea gave up the dead that were in it. Death*

and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire... and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.”

- But a key part of Christian theology has been that Jesus becomes the mediator for us, when we have to stand before the Lord on Judgment Day...
 - When we give our life to Jesus, our names are written in that book of Life!
 - In John 5:24, Jesus says this, *“Very truly I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.”*

Well, that leads us to the final piece of this puzzle... What’s the biblical view of Heaven?

- All throughout the Gospels (the New Testament books: Matthew, Mark, Luke & John), Jesus teaches people about “the Kingdom of Heaven” (or the Kingdom of God).
 - The values & ways of doing things in God’s Heavenly Kingdom will be quite different from how they’re done here...
 - The Bible speaks about this “Messianic Age,” when God’s Chosen One, the Messiah, would come and set all things right!
 - When everyone would live in peace... and there would be no more sickness or death... when hunger & poverty would be no more... and all will be welcomed!
 - As Christians, we believe that Messianic Age started with Jesus... and will be completed when he comes again in final victory... aka “The Second Coming.”
 - Jesus was the Son of the Heavenly King... and it was his resurrection from the dead that paved the way for us to enter Heaven... for our resurrection!
 - Jesus’ entire life and ministry was an opportunity for us to get a glimpse of what it’s like in God’s Kingdom... what it’s like in Heaven.
- The Apostle Paul tries to get a handle on what Heaven will be like for us... in his first letter to the church in Corinth, chapter 15, he writes:
 - *“There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another... so it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body.”* (v.40, 42-44)

- So Paul doesn't know what we'll look like in Heaven... but it will be different from what our earthly bodies are like now!
- What about families? Will we get to hang out with our families & friends in Heaven?
 - Some of the religious leaders asked Jesus this... Luke 20:27ff. tells us that some Sadducees came to question Jesus...
 - (The only problem is, they didn't believe in resurrection after death! So they were trying to make Jesus look ridiculous answering this question.)
 - *“Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be?”*
 - (Now remember, they didn't really want to know the answer... because they didn't believe it was possible!)
 - Jesus replied, *“Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed, they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection.”* (v.34-36)
 - This doesn't say whether we'll recognize our loved ones in heaven or not... simply that we won't have marriage there, like we do here on earth.
- Finally, we can't conclude any study of Heaven without mentioning the book of Revelation... for it gives the most detailed vision/description in all the Scripture.
 - In chapters 21 and 22, the author describes what the New Jerusalem (or Zion) will be like... first and foremost, God will be in the midst of the city!
 - There will be no more pain, mourning or death...
 - The city itself is described as being made of “pure gold, clear as glass” (21:18)... with all kinds of jewels & precious stones built into the wall around the city.
 - People from all the nations will be there... all whose names are written in the Book of Life...
 - *“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life, with its 12 kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found*

there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their life, and they will reign forever and ever.” (22:1-5)

What does the Bible say about Heaven & Hell... quite a lot, actually... and I've only begun to scratch the surface of this difficult, yet fascinating question...

- Although it's interesting to speculate as to what Heaven will be like... the bottom line for us, as believers, is to give ourselves to God completely, and to follow Jesus' commands of how to live out that faith!
 - Do we have to be perfect? Sinless? Work our way up to the top 10 percentile?
 - Of course not. God continues to forgive, restore & redeem us!
- When Jesus knew his time on earth was almost up, he told his disciples this : *“In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.’ Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life.’” (John 14:2-6)*
 - We know The Way, my friends.
 - Let us now follow! AMEN.