



HEAVEN & HELL

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TEACH ABOUT WHAT IS TRUE?
(INSTEAD OF WHAT WE WANT TO BE TRUE)

A Sunday Teaching Series

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Westminster Presbyterian Church, Barrie, ON

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PART 1 OF 4: HOW DO WE KNOW?



Pastor Matthew Ruttan | January 6, 2019
Westminster Presbyterian Church, Barrie, ON

As I start this new four-part teaching series called *Heaven and Hell*, I do so with anticipation, with hope, and also with great fear and trembling. It is not something I take lightly. These topics are some of the most significant ever for ourselves, and for our loved ones.

The full title to the series is: *Heaven and Hell: What does the Bible teach about what is true? (Instead of what we want to be true.)* A 2007 Gallup poll revealed that 81% of people believe in heaven, but only 69% believe in hell.¹ That seems strange. But it's also very telling. We like to believe in things we like, but not in things we don't. We like heaven. But we don't like hell, right?

Let me explain two reasons why this might be the case:

First, many of us focus on heaven and not hell because we can *neglect biblical teachings that make us uncomfortable*.

One theologian did a survey of Jesus' teaching and found that 13% referred to judgment or hell.² Speaking about final judgment in Matthew 25:46 Jesus said that some people will "go into eternal life," but others "will go away into eternal punishment."

The apostle Paul who wrote many of the books we find in the New Testament referenced the fate of the wicked with words like "perish, destroy, wrath, and punish" more than he

did words like “forgiveness, mercy and heaven” combined. The fact that these topics figure prominently in the Bible should cause us to take them seriously, even if they make us uncomfortable.

Second, many of us, for whatever reason, downplay these teachings *because of sheer apathy*.

Author Isaac Asimov was interviewed about heaven and hell. He said, “I don’t believe in hell or the afterlife... I don’t believe... so I don’t have to spend my whole life fearing hell, or fearing heaven even more. For whatever the tortures of hell, I think the boredom of heaven would be even worse.”³ It’s easy to dismiss Asimov’s statement. But when our thinking about heaven or hell doesn’t impact our lives and decisions, aren’t we acting with a similar kind of apathy?

But, my friends, and also my brothers and sisters who are also made in the image of God, if heaven isn’t real or glorious, why did Jesus teach about it and take it seriously? If things like forgiveness and reconciliation don’t matter, why did Jesus teach about them and take them seriously? And if judgment or consequence for sin isn’t real why did Jesus teach about it and take it seriously? And if hell isn’t real, why did Jesus teach about it and take it seriously?

So, right out of the gate, I’m going to give you a summary of the entire series. This will guide us over the next four weeks:

In Part 1 I’ll talk about how the Bible is the trustworthy source for God’s truth. In Part 2 I’ll talk about how heaven is incredible. Part 3 is about how hell is horrible. Part 4 will bring it all together by talking about how heaven is for those who are *right* with God and how hell is for those who are *wrong* with God. I’ll explain what makes someone wrong or right with God, and of course what to do about that. We’ll also discuss how Jesus is the ultimate judge in these matters (not us), and what to do with all this information.

So, have you ever wondered what heaven is like? Have you ever wondered what hell is like? Have you ever wondered what Jesus teaches about these things? Have you ever wondered about who goes where? If so, let’s journey carefully together over these next four weeks. I strongly believe that we are to live wisely—not based on what we *want* to be true, but on what actually is. This may be one of the most important topics you ever explore.

As we begin, I want to highlight two thoughts in my head that are guiding my approach:

The fallacy of generality

First is the *fallacy of generality*. This is the thing some people do, which is to take a general statement like “God is love” (1 John 4:8), and use it to erase parts of scripture they disagree with, or which they think aren’t loving based on their own limited understanding

or view of love. I've heard it said many times that since God is loving then hell can't be real, or that sins are never really punished, or that God doesn't need to be just.

But the problem with this is that we can easily use generalizations to just affirm what we already think and avoid what scripture actually teaches. But in this series we're not going to do that. Yes, it's true that God is loving, but he is also holy, in some cases he also exercises wrath; he is righteous, he is judge. So we will look specifically at what the text says and not succumb to the fallacy of generality. We will also compare passages against each other. You need to take all the passages and interpret them in light of one another (not just some of them).

My motive

A second thought in my head is *my motive* for doing this in the first place. It is a prayerful one, and it is driven by a pastoral and loving concern for each and every one of you. I want the best for you. And I know that God wants the best for you. In 2nd Corinthians, the apostle Paul talks about his approach as a preacher and teacher. He writes: "we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Corinthians 4:2). That is my hope as well, and that is how I approach this task.

In preparation for this series, I am re-reading and re-studying the entire New Testament, and re-reading and re-studying pertinent passages in the Old Testament, and am also reviewing and reading several books on the subject. My hope is to be as thorough as possible. I am also praying. A lot! I hope you will pray for me as well.

The groundwork

So today in Part 1, we need to lay the groundwork. As you can already tell the source of information I'm using for this series is the Bible. And my opening premise is that *the Bible is the trustworthy source for God's truth*. But why do we need to do that? Why is it so important to lay that kind of groundwork?

To explore this I invite you to open your Bibles to 2 Timothy 4:1-5. I'll be reading from the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible. As we begin, let me offer a few background comments. At this point in the letter, Paul is like an elder statesman in the first century church. And in this text he is giving advice and direction to a young protégé of sorts, Timothy. Paul is giving his wisdom for ministry and leadership. Pastors like myself have long looked to passages like this one for encouragement and wisdom. But passages like this are also helpful for congregations because of what they teach about life, service and the church. Here we go:

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge:

At this point, Paul is being very direct and powerful. He's telling Timothy that he's giving him this advice in the very presence of God and Christ (who will judge the living and the dead), and in view of his appearing (which in this case is most likely a reference to his return) and his kingdom. It's as if Paul is saying 'Be sure to listen, this is serious stuff!'

He starts by saying "Preach the word..." The implication is the word "of God." The task of preaching and teaching is to proclaim God's word, his commands, the good news about Jesus and the renewal and redemption he brings. This is the fundamental task. But why? Paul himself gives a good reminder in another letter, Romans 15:4: "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope." I love that. Encouragement and hope.

He goes on to say, "be prepared in season and out of season..." In other words, be consistent. Take this teaching and preaching of the word very seriously, and do it regardless of whether you want to or not. Another translation of the Bible says to preach this word whether it's "welcome" or "unwelcome." Another says whether the "time is favourable or not."

In his book *Blue Like Jazz*, Donald Miller says: "The problem with Christian belief—I mean real Christian belief, the belief that there is a God and a devil and a heaven and a hell—is that it is not a fashionable thing to believe."⁴ How true is that! We all know that when we talk about Jesus with some of our friends and family we definitely come across as the weird ones! It's certainly not the "fashionable" thing to believe.

Paul continues: "be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction." These are helpful words about ministry. Pastors *then*—and I would argue *now*—are supposed to correct, rebuke and encourage. We do this with great patience and careful instruction. Do you see this Bible? I am to treat it not casually, but carefully. I'm to study, re-read, pray...

And then along comes verse 3: "For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine." "Sound doctrine" is like saying "sound, biblical teaching." It was true then and it's true now. We are definitely living in one of those times now.

Let me highlight one thing—and I don't want to be pejorative—but it needs to be commented on. There is a church in our country where the minister claims to not believe in God. Think about that for a second. First, the word "minister" is Latin for servant, meaning "servant of Christ" or "servant of the Word." The word "pastor" is Latin for shepherd, meaning a shepherd of God's flock. How can you minister or pastor when you don't believe God is real? The greatest command begins, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind' (Matthew 22:37), but how can you teach that if you don't even believe he exists!

In an online forum I read someone say that the church should be inclusive and so therefore the minister should stay. Should they be welcome, befriended, prayed for? Absolutely! But

in leadership to teach about God? Absolutely not. It's unbelievable. This is happening in our country.

Here's how I think about it. Imagine if—heaven forbid—my son got a tumor. And I went to the hospital and they told me that the doctor who was to operate on him to remove the tumor (a) didn't believe that cancer was real, and therefore that (b) my son didn't really have cancer to begin with. I would go ballistic. To me, that's the same level of logic happening in a church that affirms a “minister” who doesn't believe in God. Sound doctrine? Gone. That's just one example. But there are, of course, many others.

It goes on: “Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.” In today's age this is incredibly easy to do. We can tune in to radio shows, or T.V. programs, or podcasts, or blogs, or friends, or Oprah, or whoever, and simply find people who say what we want to hear. But that doesn't necessarily mean we're dialing into “sound teaching.”

Verses 4 and 5 say, “They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.” This means to stay balanced, do the hard work whether you feel like it or not; continue to share the news about Jesus and his salvation; carry out your duties.

Do we have “itching ears”?

Here's my question for us: Are we going to be people who are lumped in with the people Paul was writing about in the first century, people with “itching ears” who “turn their ears away from the truth”? And I want to challenge us on this point a little bit and make it more personal as it relates to what we're talking about with forgiveness and heaven and judgment and hell:

What do we think heaven is like? Do you just picture golf courses, beaches, or parties at a downtown club where there are free drinks? Where do we get those images? The Bible? Or whoever just says what we want them to say? Do we have “itching ears”?

Who do we think goes to heaven? Do you think it's just people who are nice, or people who we love? Where do we get those images? The Bible? Or whoever just says what we want them to say? Do we have “itching ears”?

What do we think hell is like? Do we think it's full of boiling cauldrons of hot oil? I heard someone say a description that curiously sounded like someone else's definition of heaven—that they wanted to go there because it would be a fun, noisy party with free drinks. “All my friends will be there!” they chuckled. What gives that person the idea that there will be even a single drop of fun, joy or happiness in hell? So where do we get these images? The Bible? Or whoever just says what we want them to say? Do we have “itching ears”?

Who do we think goes to hell? Only really evil people like Hitler, members of ISIS, or people who abuse children? Certainly not anyone we know, and certainly not us, right? Where do we get these ideas? The Bible? Or whoever just says what we want them to say? Do we have “itching ears”?

Listen again to verse 3: “For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.”

The Bible is the trustworthy source for God’s truth

The basic premise today is that the Bible is the trustworthy source for God’s truth. And we’re going to talk about why that is. A story told by John Ortberg in his book *Soul Keeping* helps illustrate the point.

Bill Hybels was a pastor who had his Bible open in a restaurant studying for a sermon. A waitress asked “Why are you reading *that*?” Bill decided to answer quite forcefully, perhaps wanting to start a conversation. He said, “Because I don’t feel like going to hell when I die.”

“There is no such thing as heaven or hell,” she said.

“Why do you say that?” he asked.

“Everybody knows that when you die, your candle goes out... *poof!*”

“You mean to tell me there’s no afterlife?”

“No.”

“So that means you must be able to just live as you please?”

“That’s right,” she said.

“Like there’s no judgment day or anything?”

“Right.”

“Well, that’s fascinating to me. Where did you hear that?”

“I read it somewhere.”

“Can you give me the name of the book?”

“I don’t recall.”

“Can you give me the name of the author of the book?”

“I forgot his name.”

“Did the author write other books?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is it possible,” Hybels asked, “that your author changed his mind two years after he wrote this particular book, and then wrote another one that said there is a heaven and a hell? Is that possible?”

“It’s possible, but not likely.”

“All right, let me get this straight. You are rolling the dice on your eternity predicated on what someone you don’t even know wrote in a book you can’t even recall the title of. Have I got that straight?”

“That’s right,” she said.

“You know what I think, my friend? I think you have merely created a belief that guarantees the continuation of your unencumbered lifestyle. I think you made it up,

because it is very discomfoting to think of a heaven. It is a very discomfoting thought to think of a hell. It is very unnerving to face a holy God in the day of reckoning. I think you made it all up.”⁵

The conversation got a little edgy after that! But the story obviously illustrates the importance of being rooted in something trustworthy, especially when it comes to things of eternal consequence.

So our question is why? *Why* is the Bible a trustworthy source of God’s truth if we are going to go to it for wisdom about things as important as heaven and hell?

I could talk about the biblical passages that talk about how it is inspired by God. Passages like 2 Timothy 3:16: “All Scripture is God-breathed...” Or Isaiah 40:8: “the word of our God endures forever...” But I won’t.

I could talk about how the manuscripts of our earliest copies of the Bible are very reliable and incredibly preserved. How there are over 5000 ancient hand-written manuscripts for the New Testament alone. But I won’t.

I could talk about how many of the New Testament writings from the Bible were written and being circulated while there were still eye witnesses living, meaning they could either confirm or deny events, lending to their credibility and authenticity. But I won’t.

I could talk about how Jesus is the most well-documented historical figure from human history. But I won’t.

I could talk about how the Bible has stood the test of time for thousands of years and has stood up to intense criticisms, and instead of going away, continues to have a massive impact and—year after year—continues to be the world’s #1 seller. But I won’t.

I could talk about its prominent place in global Christianity (which, although struggling in some churches in North America is growing to the tune of 50,000 new adherents a day globally, by the way), and how according to historian Mark Noll the Bible is the authoritative pattern for living and teaching in the lives of Christians as it grows all over the world. But I won’t.⁶

I could talk about how the Bible—and particularly the life and teachings of Jesus contained within the Bible—have transformed millions of lives through human history. But I won’t.

I could also talk about the massive and impressive historical and societal impact the Bible has had throughout the world—for example, that because all humans are created in God’s image and therefore have value and dignity, this has driven movements in accessible health care, free education and literacy, human rights advancements, democracy, fair judicial systems, endless care for the poor and hungry, even scientific advancements because of a deep desire to explore the intricate and beautiful world God has clearly made. But I won’t.

Instead, I will focus on one thing:

Jesus himself considered the Scriptures to be authoritative and from God. The Saviour trusted the Scriptures.

For example, with respect to the Old Testament:

When Jesus was tempted by Satan three times in the wilderness as recorded in Matthew 4:1-11, each time he appealed to the authority of Old Testament by quoting from it, three times from the book of Deuteronomy.

Several other places he appeals to its authority by saying “as it is written,” which is the ancient equivalent of saying “the Bible says...”

Jesus consistently quotes the Old Testament to settle various disputes. For example, in Matthew 19, he quotes Genesis 2 to settle a concern about divorce.

In John 5:39 he even says that the Old Testament points to and testifies about himself. This is confirmed when, in Luke 4:14-21, while in a Synagogue, he reads from Isaiah 61 and applies it to himself.

In Mark 7, Jesus quotes the Old Testament teachings through Moses and calls them the “word of God” and “the commands of God.”

In John 10:35 he says that “Scripture cannot be set aside.”

That’s Jesus!

But what about the New Testament? It’s written about Jesus and by and about the early church. Let me offer a few thoughts:

In several places, Jesus commissions the apostles to continue his work and teaching throughout the world (the most famous example is the end of Matthew 28:16-20). Many of the New Testament writings are partly a result of that commission *from Jesus himself*.

In John 14-16, Jesus says that after he leaves the Holy Spirit will help the apostles, and will “teach you all things and *remind* you of everything I have said to you” (John 14:26, emphasis added). He says the Holy Spirit will help them remember his teachings which clearly impacts not only their spoken words but their written ones too. In fact, it is a reasonable assumption that some of the apostles would have felt that they were carrying out Jesus’ instructions under God’s guidance when they recorded his words and continued his teachings in writing.

In 2 Peter 3:1-2, the chief apostle Peter, says that he considers his writing the result of the “command of our Lord and Saviour” (referring to Jesus).

Again, Peter calls some of the Apostle Paul's writings in the New Testament "scripture" (2 Peter 3:16). And then Paul quotes the gospel of Luke in the New Testament calling it "scripture" (1 Timothy 5:18). To me this is an indication that the writers were aware that they continuing the tradition of the sacred word.

So why am I saying all of this? For a very significant reason: We are looking for wisdom about heaven and hell from the Bible. But why should we trust it? There are many reasons. But the one I'm focussing on is this: Jesus himself considered the Scriptures to be authoritative and from God. The Saviour trusted the Scriptures. And we can do the same as we look for eternal wisdom for our lives, including these essential topics of heaven and forgiveness, and judgment and hell.

As we end this part 1, let me recap our overall trajectory: In Part 1 we've talked about how the Bible is the trustworthy source for God's truth. In Part 2 I'll talk about how heaven is incredible. Part 3 is about how hell is horrible. Part 4 will bring it all together by talking about how heaven is for those who are *right* with God and how hell is for those who are *wrong* with God. I'll explain what makes someone wrong or right with God, and of course what to do about that. We'll also discuss how Jesus is the ultimate judge in these matters (not us), and what to do with all this information.

I hope we will journey carefully and truthfully together. I hope we do that without "itching ears," not just gathering ideas around ourselves that suit our own selfish desires. I hope that we ground our learnings in, as it says in 2 Timothy, "sound doctrine," taking seriously the Scriptures that Jesus took seriously.

With thankfulness, reverence and joy

I want to end with a short video that shows some Chinese Christians getting a delivery of bibles in their own language. I think it was from the 1980's. It's a video a friend sent to me. Watch the gratitude, the passion, of getting their very own copies in their very own language...

[Video is played]

Wow. Did you see the intense thankfulness, the level of reverence, the joy? I gave a talk to a youth conference a few years ago and played that video. There was a young woman there who spoke the language of the woman who talked in the video. She said she was expressing her deep gratitude, and also thanking the people who had made it possible for them to get their own copies of the Scriptures in their own language.

Friends, Jesus himself considered the Scriptures to be authoritative and from God. The Saviour trusted the Scriptures. Therefore, what a distinct privilege that we too can read it and learn from it. So that's what we will do with careful attention and gratitude.

Let me end with this final word, revisiting Romans 15:4: “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.”

Let’s journey through this *Heaven and Hell* series together. Amen.

PART 2 OF 4: WHAT IS HEAVEN LIKE?



Pastor Matthew Ruttan | January 13, 2019
Westminster Presbyterian Church, Barrie, ON

Last week we started a new four-part teaching series called *Heaven and Hell*. I lead this series with anticipation, with hope, and also with great fear and trembling. It is not something I take lightly. These topics are some of the most significant ever for ourselves, and for our loved ones.

The full title to the series is: *Heaven and Hell: What does the Bible teach about what is true? (Instead of what we want to be true.)* A 2007 Gallup poll revealed that 81% of people believe in heaven, but only 69% believe in hell. That seems strange. But it's also very telling. We like to believe in things we like, but not in things we don't. We like heaven. But we don't like hell, right?

Let me explain one reason why this might be the case: As I mentioned last week, many of us focus on heaven and not hell because we can *neglect biblical teachings that make us uncomfortable*. But one theologian did a survey of Jesus' teaching and found that 13% referred to judgment or hell. Speaking about final judgment in Matthew 25:46 Jesus said that some people will "go into eternal life," but others "will go away into eternal punishment." The fact that these topics figure prominently in the Bible should cause us to take them seriously, even if they make us uncomfortable.

Right out of the gate, I'm going to give you a summary of the entire series. This will guide us over the next four weeks: In Part 1 we talked about how the Bible is the trustworthy source for God's truth. In Part 2 (today) I'll talk about how heaven is incredible. Part 3 is

about how hell is horrible. Part 4 will bring it all together by talking about how heaven is for those who are *right* with God and how hell is for those who are *wrong* with God. I'll explain what makes someone wrong or right with God, and of course what to do about that. We'll also discuss how Jesus is the ultimate judge in these matters (not us), and what to do with all this information.

So, have you ever wondered what heaven is like? Have you ever wondered what hell is like? Have you ever wondered what Jesus teaches about these things? Have you ever wondered about who goes where? If so, let's journey carefully together over these next five weeks. I strongly believe that we are to live wisely—not based on what we *want* to be true, but on what actually is. This may be one of the most important topics you ever explore.

Let me also recap my major motive for doing this: It is a prayerful one, and it is driven by a pastoral and loving concern for each and every one of you. I want the best for you. And I know that God wants the best for you.

Last week in Part 1 we explored the idea that the Bible is the trustworthy source of truth and information about things like heaven and hell. It's an important question to ask because if we are going to confide about what we discover in this series, it needs to be built on something credible. Of the many reasons I alluded to last week about why the Bible is a trustworthy source of truth, the main one I focussed on was this: that Jesus himself considered the Scriptures to be authoritative and from God. The Saviour trusted the Scriptures. And therefore, so can we.

Part 2

Today for Part 2 we focus on this question: What is heaven like?

I think this is a massively significant question, and something of interest to each and every one of us. After all, unless you're a robot, you have probably spent some time wondering what heaven is like. After all, while living on this earth every single one of us will die. All of us are one heartbeat away from meeting our Maker. And if you are a Christian, you are confident that you will be in heaven after that moment, whenever it happens to be. So, what will it be like?

Another reason this is a massively significant question, is because all of us have people we can think of who we love, who have died, and who we hope are in heaven. If so, what is it like for them? What are they going through? Are they at peace? Are they experiencing joy? Are they aware of what goes on down here? Can they see us?

Four truths debunked

First, I'm going to debunk a few things. And then we're going to look at what the Bible actually teaches.

Untruth #1: *Heaven is boring.*

Last week I referred to author Isaac Asimov's statement that he thought heaven would be boring. As I like to point out, this is a general sentiment that is in our popular culture, mostly because people in our wider society do not use the Bible as their source of information about heaven. So we have to put up with mind-numbing depictions like those we see in Philadelphia Cream Cheese commercials where some lady is bouncing around to bad harp music eating bagels.

It's also a sentiment summarized well by the witty comic *The Far Side*. It shows a guy on a cloud, clearly bored out of his skull saying, "I wish I'd brought a magazine."

Untruth #2: *Heaven is whatever you want it to be.*

Many people think that heaven is a bigger, better version of the things they've enjoyed while on earth. That's why you often hear at funerals or celebrations of life people speculating like how cousin Bob or Grandpa is surely on a never-ending camping trip with an unlimited supply of Budweiser, and where he catches a massive fish after ever cast. I saw a video of hockey legend Wayne Gretzky speaking at the funeral of his former teammate Dave Semenko's where he said, "I can see them now sitting up in heaven, you know there's a game of hockey up there, Toe Blake is coaching..." I feel *very* reluctant to contradict The Great One, and I'm sure he was just offering some comfort at a difficult time, but there are no indications in scripture that heaven is something we can just make up. But that's actually a good thing because heaven will be so much better than anything we have experienced on earth.

Untruth #3: *Heaven is the last thing there is.*

Now I realize this is a new or possibly confusing idea to many of you. However, you all need to know that this is a part of biblical teaching, and it has been taught in historic Christianity since the church began 2000 years ago. If what I'm about to say is totally new to you, it is simply because, for whatever reason, some churches have neglected to teach about it in the past 60 or 70 years.

Here's the teaching. The Bible teaches that one day Christ will return. It's called the Second Coming. Most of you are familiar with that. And when that happens, there will be what is called Judgment Day, or the day of reckoning. At that time, Jesus will judge the living and the dead. All people will stand before Jesus and give an account of their lives. But after that, he will usher in a "new heavens and a new earth." It means that what we had known in heaven up to that point will somehow change, and Jesus' prayer from the Lord's Prayer will finally be fulfilled: "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). Heaven and earth will come together at last and all things will be made new. It will be similar to heaven because God is there, but it will be somewhat different. That's why some people call the heaven we'll experience right after we die "intermediate heaven" since it will be our experience in God's dwelling place before this final judgment day, and before the new heavens and the new earth are fully created.

Untruth #4: *The main thing Jesus taught about was going to heaven after you die.*

This is simply not true. Although he did talk about it, and although it's very important, it is not the primary thrust of his teaching. Jesus focussed on the kingdom of God, and on putting our trust in him as we sought to be a part of the ways he was bringing heaven to earth. A summary of his teaching is found in the Lord's Prayer: "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." In the past two weeks I've re-read the entire New Testament—the vast majority of his teachings are about bringing heaven to earth; about being disciples and making disciples; about relationships that are forgiving, sacrificial, truthful, and loving in nature; about trusting and relying on God instead of money or status; about tending to the hurting and outcast; about healing disease; and about fighting Satan, sin and evil through exorcism, healing, and through what he did on the cross. It's about restoring the world to how it was originally intended to be, about making it more like heaven on earth.

So, is heaven important? Yes, absolutely. But being a follower and disciple of Jesus is what the New Testament talks about more. The word disciple appears 269 times. Therefore, the Christian life isn't about waiting on earth for heaven, but working for heaven on earth.

Two things to keep in mind

As we explore this critical topic, we need to keep in mind two things:

The first is that the Bible tells us everything we need to know, not everything there is to know. That means that the Bible tells us some amazing things, but it doesn't tell us everything. Today we're getting glimpses, not a full road map.

Second, when you go through all the biblical passages as I have, you discover that sometimes it is unclear if Jesus or the other people in the New Testament are referring to life after death in heaven, or how life could be changed in this world if it were to look more like that later heaven. For example, when Jesus teaches about the "kingdom of heaven" in Matthew's Gospel he's often talking about how life could be transformed in our lives and world in the here and now if it were to look more like heaven. But I think it's a safe assumption that regardless of which realm he's talking about, both teach us something about what heaven is like.

What is heaven actually like?

1. Going to heaven is immediate

Even though Judgment Day itself when Jesus returns occurs some day in the future that none of know, if we die before that day, the faithful will go immediately to heaven. We are assured of this in passages like Luke 23:42-43 where Jesus is talking to the criminal on the cross who is crucified next to him. The criminal says, "Jesus, remember me when you

come into your kingdom.” Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, *today* you will be with me in paradise” (emphasis added). After the faithful die, they go to heaven immediately.

A little girl had been praying with her grandfather. Let me tell you from personal experience, that the faith of little children can be very profound in times of life and death—have you noticed that? The next day the grandfather died and the little girl was given the difficult news by her mother. The girl started to cry and her mom said, “Try not to be sad, honey.” “I’m not,” the girl replied, “these are happy tears.” “They are?” “Yes. I prayed that grandpa’s cancer would be gone. And now it has. And right now he’s happy and with Jesus.” She knew that upon death, a meeting with God was immediate.

2. Heaven is the full and astonishing dwelling place of God

People have often wondered where heaven is. I remember reading one of Lucy Maud Montgomery’s journals where she recounts being in a church service when she was about four and the pastor mentioned heaven. She asked her Aunt Emily, who was sitting in the pew beside her, where heaven was. Her aunt simply pointed up. So for years, Lucy thought heaven was in the attic of the church. It puzzled her why they simply couldn’t go up there and visit her mother who had passed away!⁷

But even though we don’t know *where* heaven is, we know *what* it is. It is the full and astonishing dwelling place of God. Specifically it’s where his throne is. Psalm 103:19 says, “The Lord has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all.” This is echoed in Isaiah 66:1: “This is what the Lord says: ‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool...’”

Because of this, Dr Gavin Ortlund, senior pastor of First Baptist Church of Ojai in California says, “boredom will be unthinkable” in heaven.⁸ He goes on to say that if you think heaven is boring it’s because you think God is boring. As I’ll shortly explain, it is simply impossible for heaven to be boring! Think of it for a second. We are talking about the God who created the universe and set out the stars, and created our senses and the vast array of colours, and gave us taste buds to experience foods that make us salivate, and the beautiful and intense feelings of joy when we are reunited with a long lost friend... Do we truly think that the God who did all that would make his own home for himself and for his followers to be boring? Not in a million years.

3. In heaven you will be known and expected

In heaven, when you arrive, you will have been expected. In Luke 10:20 Jesus tells his apostles to “rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” That their names are written there means they’re expected. They are known, anticipated. In Philippians 3:20 Paul writes, “But our citizenship is in heaven.” Your citizenship is your home and native land. You will feel at home because your home and native land is a heavenly one.

Have you ever gone away to another country for a holiday, and as soon as you crossed the border back into Canada you breathed a sigh of relief? ‘Ah, home at last!’ Feels good, doesn’t it? I can only imagine that is only a portion of going to heaven will be like.

C.S. Lewis was a world-class literary critic, and also the author of popular works such as *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* and *Mere Christianity*, said this: “If I find in myself desires which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”⁹ In other words, since he never felt fully at home in this troubled world we live in, he felt it was a sign that he was made for another world, for heaven. Heaven will feel like home—a place where we are known and expected.

Perhaps the most well-known biblical passage about all this is John 14:2 where Jesus comforts his disciples before he is about to leave them from his time on earth. It’s a passage many of us have heard at funerals: “My Father’s house has many rooms,” Jesus says, “if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?” Jesus himself goes and prepares a place for us.

4. In heaven you will meet God

In Romans 14:10 Paul says, “For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat.” In verse 12 he also says, “each one of us will give an account of ourselves to God.” We’ll talk more about that tremendous moment later in this series, but for now it’s sufficient to say we will actually meet God as a part of our experience in heaven.

Who is the most famous or impressive people you have ever met? I know someone who has met the Queen. I know someone who has met Justin Trudeau. I know someone who has met Blake Shelton. I know people who have met famous athletes. I myself got to meet Paul Henderson, the man who scored the game-winning goal in the 1972 summit hockey series between Canada and the Soviet Union. That was pretty cool. Imagine meeting GOD!

5. Heaven will be *better* than what you experience in this life

In Philippians 1:23, the apostle Paul is struggling with his own situation in and says, “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (ESV). He’s talking about the fact that he still has important work to do in this world, but if he were to die, he would look forward to that experience because it would be better.

Steven Curtis Chapman is a well-known Christian singer. In May 2008 he and his wife, Mary Beth, were devastated when their 5-year old daughter, Maria, was killed in a car accident. Many people sent in words of comfort and support. But one conversation stood out that really helped him. It was with pastor Greg Laurie who could relate to their experience because he had also lost a son in a car accident. Thinking ahead to heaven and knowing that would be a comfort to them, here is what the pastor said to Chapman: “Remember, your future with Maria is infinitely greater than your past with her.”¹⁰

If your idea of heaven is based on biblical truth, it encourages you and gives you hope in this life because it reassures you that the best is yet to come! That thinking works backwards bringing hope into the difficult experiences you are going through now.

Think of your own absolute best top-ten experiences in life. A wonderful family memory? Winning a huge game? A tremendous achievement? The satisfaction from a certain relationship? Disney world? A meaningful project you worked on? An intensely meaningful mission trip? Or an adventure? Something that brings simple but soul-lifting delight to you every time you experience it? Heaven is *better* than every single one of those experiences.

6. Heaven will be worshipful

How could it not since God is there? In the Bible, when people come into the presence of God they worship—they can't help it! Worship is adoration. Philippians 2:10-11 says, "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." I also think of a vision of heaven from Revelation 5:13 where we're given insight into the future when every single creation in the entirety of creation yells out in worshipful praise to God: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"

Imagine a massive football stadium or hockey arena with the most important sports event of all time and everyone is on their feet cheering the brains out. That image starts to get close to what worship would be like in heaven. And it will include everyone.

7. Heaven will be joy-filled and peace-filled

It can't not be. Keeping in mind that heaven is the full and astonishing dwelling place of God, hear what it says in Psalm 16:11 (ESV) that "in [God's] presence there is fullness of joy."

In the second last chapter in the Bible, Revelation 21:3-5 gives us a glimpse of what it will be like when Christ ushers in the "new heavens and the new earth." And I think it's a reasonable assumption that these words apply not only to the new heavens and the new earth that will come at the very end of time, but also to our time in heaven before that Day because it tells us something about what life is like in the presence of God himself. Verse four says: "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

Imagine that with me for a moment. No more tears. No more pain. No more cancer. No more heart disease. No more car accidents. No more anxiety. No more rejection. No more grief. No more sleepless nights. No more panic attacks. No more joint pain. No more sick children. Hospitals won't even exist. No more financial worries. Money won't even exist! No more disappointments. No more friends ignoring you or not calling you back. No more family feuds. No more hurtful words. No more painful relationships. Can you imagine

every relationship being the perfect possibility of what it could be? A smile across your face with every other person you meet? Imagine no more polluted environment. No more social injustice. No more despair. No more cynicism. No more doubt. No more. I once heard it described like this; it will be a place where everything sad is going to come untrue.

In his book *The God of Yes*, Las Vegas Pastor Jud Wilhite describes heaven like this: heaven “will be everything good in life, multiplied times God, minus all the pain, sorrow, fear, injustice, and loss.”¹¹

8. Heaven will include celebration, like a huge feast

In Matthew 8:11 Jesus says, “I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.” This is echoed in Luke 13:29.

So many wonderful moments are captured around dinner tables. So many tense moments too, but here we are thinking about the good ones! The times when people are laughing and feasting and getting along. The plans have been made and completed, the food and drinks are ready, and everyone is just immersed in the goodness of it all. This is an image the Bible uses for heaven.

At the same time, we need to make a bit of a digression. The Bible teaches that when Christ returns there will be a general resurrection of the dead, meaning that our souls will actually be reunited with our bodies. 1 Corinthians 15 calls them “spiritual bodies.” So if we are in heaven before Christ returns to the earth, there is some considerable debate about what we’ll physically be like. We will clearly know and recognize each other, and we’ll clearly be able to do things like worship and communicate and feast together, but how our souls will exactly look or feel is simply a question that the Bible does not tell us.

9. Heaven includes rejoicing, and most likely an awareness of what is happening on earth

First, we can’t be in God’s presence and not rejoice. In Luke 15:7, Jesus says this: “I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.” This teaches us that in heaven, there is rejoicing when someone comes to know Christ. Perhaps this is because the people in heaven are simply excited that someone else will get to share in their mind-blowing and awesome experience. Another thing it teaches us, and perhaps I’m reading too much into this, but it seems to me to suggest that people in heaven are somehow aware of what is happening on earth.

Many of us are already Christians. And I appreciate that perhaps a few of you are uncertain or are still considering it. But just imagine that moment in your life when you decided to trust and know Jesus and become one of his followers—we often think of this as the moment of salvation. Maybe it was during a prayer, a church service, in a small group, in a quiet moment, or in a conversation with a friend... when you said Yes to Christ. Just picture that there was, at that very moment, a party in heaven—a celebration by people

who have gone on before, going wild with happiness—happiness that heaven gained another child.

10. Heaven will include incredible rewards

In Matthew 6:20-21 Jesus encouraged his followers to store up “treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.” This means that the most important things—things like faithfulness, love, truth, friendship, joy, peace—*cannot be taken from you*. They are no longer under threat of being stolen or lost.

Do you want to know what I do here on earth? I lock my house so that my wife and children are safe at night and so that no one can take my stuff. I read and read and read so that I can defend and explain my faith to the atheist attackers who come at me on the internet and so that I can better equip you to defend your faith in a society that is increasingly hostile to it. We have to work at being loving and truthful. And maybe some of us fear friends being taken from us or leaving town. But in heaven? Not so! All the treasures that matter most are out in the open—safe, secure and free—as we live in the presence of pure goodness.

11. Heaven will be full of child-like faith

Let me end with this. In Matthew 18:3-4 Jesus says to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” The implication is that those with childlike faith will enter God’s heavenly kingdom. Note here that I didn’t say child-*ish* faith, but child-*like* faith—there’s a difference. Again in Matthew 19:14 we read, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” And in Mark 10:15: “Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

I have a lot of opportunities at the church to ask kids questions about God; I love to engage their imaginations. I was with a group of kids one time and asked, “If you could ask the Lord one question, what would it be?” Without hesitation, a preschooler replied: “Can I give you a hug and a kiss?”

My first reaction was to correct her. Wouldn't it be better to not waste your question? But then I stopped myself. She was showing me the pure, unfiltered, loving spirit of a child who has been told her whole life how much God gives her and loves her. No wonder Jesus says the kingdom of God belongs to those who are like little children! I started out wanting to engage *their* imaginations. Turns out, they engaged *mine!*

Think of that kind of child-like faith, the beauty of it: “Can I give you a hug and a kiss?” My guess is that the Lord would bend down, smile, and respond, “Yes, please!”

Heaven will be full of child-like faith—trusting, open, loving, affectionate. When children are at their best they trust, they share, they love, they laugh—in fact, some would say they are laughter experts. They are also experts at being taken care of by someone else! They totally rely on the care of others. And so will we.

As I bring this to a close, my question for you is this: *When you think about what heaven is like, are your ideas just something you or someone else made up? Or is it based on biblical truth?*

Summary

Let me summarize:

First, our four untruths about heaven, all of which are incorrect: That heaven is boring; that heaven is whatever you want it to be; that heaven is the last thing there is; that the main thing Jesus taught about was going to heaven after you die.

In contrast, what *is* heaven like? Going to heaven is immediate. Heaven is the full and astonishing dwelling place of God. In heaven you will be known and expected. Heaven will be *better* than what you experience in this life. Heaven will be worshipful. Heaven will be joy-filled and peace-filled. Heaven will include celebration, like a huge feast. Heaven includes rejoicing, and most likely an awareness of what is happening on earth. Heaven will include incredible rewards. Heaven will be full of child-like faith.

Hungry for heaven?

Friends, my brothers and sisters, be assured of this: *If you're not hungry for heaven, you've been misinformed.* Heaven is a place that you should want to go. And it should also be a place where you want the people you know to go as well.

Let me share this final thought. Billy Graham tells the story of a 30 year-old truck driver. His future was ahead of him and it was all smooth sailing. But one day while driving he started to get pains in his chest. He went to the hospital and soon found out that a malignant tumor was wrapped around his heart.

It was complicated to say the least. But through the treatment and surgery his attitude amazed the doctors and nurses at the University of Michigan. In the midst of what would make many people crumple on the floor, he was incredibly positive—despite the tubes, pills, needles, procedures and set-backs. Apparently the size of the hope *in* his heart was bigger than the tumour wrapped *around* his heart.

They asked him how he could have such a great attitude even though he was in the midst of a life and death battle with cancer. So he told them about his faith in Jesus. Even still, they didn't hold out much hope and said that only a miracle could save him. He looked at them and said: "Docs, I'm in a win-win play-off. If I live I win. If I die I win."¹² Friends,

there is a man who was soaked and saturated with the hope of heaven. Remember, if you are a faithful follower of Christ, you're in a win-win playoff.

This week our key question was: What is heaven like? Next week it is: What is hell like?

Let's continue to journey wisely through this series and this life—not based on what we *want* to be true, but on what actually is.

Amen.

PART 3 OF 4: WHAT IS HELL LIKE?



Pastor Matthew Ruttan | January 20, 2019
Westminster Presbyterian Church, Barrie, ON

Friends, today we're in the middle of a teaching series called *Heaven and Hell*. It's something I have approached with anticipation, with hope, and also with fear and trembling—and this is certainly true today. The full title is: *Heaven and Hell: What does the Bible teach about what is true (instead of what we want to be true)*. What got me initially thinking about this series was a Gallup poll I heard about, which was that 81% of people polled believed in heaven, and by contrast, only 69% believed in hell. We like to believe in things we like, like heaven, and we don't like to believe in things we don't, like hell, right?

And yet, Jesus talked about them both. In fact, according to one theologian, 13% of Jesus' teachings are about judgment and hell. And my suspicion, is that one of the reasons we talk about heaven more than hell is because we are simply uncomfortable with the idea. But the fact that Jesus talks about them so much should give us pause, humble us, and cause us to take these teachings seriously because he did.

So have you ever wondered what heaven is like? Have you ever wondered what hell is like? Have you ever wondered what Jesus taught about these things? If so, this series is for you. I firmly believe we are to live wisely—not based on what we *want* to be true, but on what actually is.

Here's our trajectory for the series. In Part 1 I talked about about how the Bible is the trustworthy source for God's truth. In Part 2 I talked about how heaven is incredible. Part 3

(today) is about how hell is horrible. Part 4 will bring it all together by talking about how heaven is for those who are *right* with God and how hell is for those who are *wrong* with God. I'll explain what makes someone wrong or right with God, and of course what to do about that. We'll also discuss how Jesus is the ultimate judge in these matters (not us), and what to do with all this information.

Today's topic is hell. And I just need to tell you, this is something that I feel is very important to talk about. It is also the sermon I am looking forward to least. And if you're fairly new to our Westminster church family, or even if today is your first Sunday here, I want to ensure you not to worry that I don't preach about the horrors of hell every single Sunday!

A detestable topic

Let's be honest, hell is a detestable topic. Tim Keller, the New York pastor and New York Times best-selling author has said that "divine judgment is one of Christianity's most offensive doctrines."¹³ The great author and literary critic C.S. Lewis once wrote: "There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power."¹⁴

With all of this in mind I want you to remember two things:

First, what I'm about to say to you comes from a pastoral and loving concern for you. I don't teach about hell because I enjoy it. I don't. But God wants the best for you. And I want the best for you. And so it is my responsibility to present the truths of scripture as clearly and as accurately as I can for all of our benefit, even if it is a challenging topic.

Second, and this is something I hope gets seared into your mind: *Jesus loves you too much to lie to you*. I truly believe that if you choose to avoid the teachings about hell, you're choosing to avoid the teachings of Jesus. We all like Jesus, right? And so do people who don't even follow him! They like his teachings about love and forgiveness and blessing little children. But that isn't all he teaches about.

Here's how we're going to proceed: First, I'll debunk three untruths about hell. Then we'll ask, 'What is hell?' then 'What is hell like?' and then 'What is hell for?'

Three untruths about hell debunked

The first untruth is that hell is only reserved for the ultra-wicked.

A lot of people struggle with the idea that hell could ever exist. They think that since God is love he would never create a place of everlasting punishment. And I'll discuss that more shortly. But what I want to say here is that some people, if they struggle with the idea of hell, may concede that hell exists but only for the ultra-wicked. It makes them feel good somehow that for super-villains, if they don't get punished in this life, certainly will in the next.

I once heard it said that if there wasn't a hell, God would have created one just for Hitler. This speaks to the fact that it satisfies, deep within us, a sense of justice: those who are ultra-wicked in this life—people like Adolf Hitler, or members of the terrorist group ISIS, or people like child molesters or human traffickers—will be one day eternally punished for their wickedness. However, scripture presents a view, as I will share shortly, that hell is not reserved only for who we might consider “the ultra-wicked.”

The second untruth is that hell could never exist because it is inconsistent with a God of love.

This presumes a few things. First, it presumes that God's love trumps other characteristics about God. Do you want to know what Scripture says most about God's character? It's holiness. So yes, God is love, but he is also holy, pure, righteous—and yes, sometimes he uses wrath to punish sin. None of these trump the other; they are all equally consistent. In a book about hell, Erik Raymond says: “God does not compromise his holiness in order to accommodate his love.”¹⁵

The second thing this untruth presumes is that our sin is not a big deal and should never be punished fully. As I will explain next week, that is simply not the case.

The third untruth is that hell is a big party where anything goes.

I remember talking to someone—and maybe you've had similar conversations with people—who said, “I'd rather go to hell because it will be a big party and all my friends will be there!” This comes from the idea that heaven is a boring place with fairies bouncing around eating bagels and listening to bad harp music, and where in hell there is loud music, an endless supply of free drinks, and a general disregard for the rules of moral constriction. About this, we need to be clear about something. When people say this, or when you say this, we are dismissing the most horrible thing imaginable. We are making light of it.

But get this. In Romans 1:20, the apostle Paul says this: “For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.” One of the implications of this statement is that simply in and around us in this world we get to enjoy and plainly see and experience God's goodness in nature and in other people. So let me be clear: the goodness in this world in nature and in other people are the result of God and his goodness. Hell, as I will explain shortly, is eternal separation from God. Let me repeat: Hell is eternal separation from God. Since those in hell are eternally separated from God, they are also separated from all good things. There is no laughter; there is no happiness; there is no partying; there is no kibitzing with friends. Where do we get any indication that there is any joy in hell? There is no joy. In Luke 16 in the story of the rich man and the beggar, the rich man is in Hades and asks that someone “dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony... (Luke 16:24). Does that sound fun?

What is hell?

As I always say, details matter. And so if we are going to have clearer understanding, we need to pay attention to the details to more fully understand hell. With that in mind, here are some key words.

Sheol: In the Old Testament, a word that comes up is the Hebrew word “Sheol.” It is often used to refer to a kind of shadowy underworld, a realm of the dead. But for the Israelite people of the Old Testament, they still had a clear sense that the faithful would receive reward when they died, and the wicked would be punished.

But much more clarity comes to the picture when we turn to the New Testament. In the New Testament, let’s look at three Greek words that come up and are used.

Hades: The first word that is sometimes translated as “hell” into English is the Greek word “hades.” It appears ten times in the New Testament, and often seems to refer to a similar thing like *Sheol* in the Old Testament, a shadowy underworld for the dead.

Tartaros: The second word that is sometimes translated into English as “hell” is “tartaros.” It’s used only twice. One of those times is in 2 Peter 2:4 when he says that angels who rebelled and sinned against God were sent to “hell / tartaros,” putting them “in chains of darkness to be held for judgment.”

Gehenna: But it is a third word that is translated into English as “hell” which is “gehenna” that occurs the most and is the one that most clearly denotes eternal punishment after death. It occurs twelve times, and eleven of those times on the lips of Jesus.

The background with that word is that it literally means the Valley of Hinnom. In Jeremiah 7:32 the prophet called it a “valley of slaughter.” People who worshipped the false god Molech did so by sacrificing their own children there. Imagine that for a second: taking your own children, killing them, and offering them up in flames to a false god. Not only that, but in Jesus’ time it was used as a dump where the garbage from the city of Jerusalem was continually on fire. Because of these various reasons, it was a word people could relate to and which came to be used to refer to the place of everlasting punishment.

But, more specifically, what is hell?

Hell is the absence of God’s presence. Speaking about the return of Christ, 2 Thessalonians 1:9 says there will be punishment who do not know God and who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus; they will be “shut out from the presence of the Lord.”

Now let me be clear: Some people who don’t take God seriously think that being shut out from God’s presence is somehow a good thing because they think that God doesn’t like fun or just makes rules that they don’t like. But this is a *gross* misunderstanding of God. God is loving and the Creator of goodness and joy. Hope-filled laughter comes from God. The beauty of nature comes from God. Sunsets, reunions with friends, good tasting food,

pleasure... all of them have their origins in God. So if we are separated from God, *all of those things are gone*. Hell is the absence of God's presence, and that includes all of his mercy and goodness—and that should cause every single person on earth to stop in their tracks and tremble in horror.

In his book *John 3:16*, Max Lucado tells a story about a woman who had lived her whole life disrespecting God. On her deathbed, in her final hours on earth, she would not let anyone utter a word about God or eternity. Lucado himself, as he tells the story, says that no one knows her final thoughts and it is not our job to judge, but a few hours from her death in a weakened state, she opened her eyes, and speaking to face that was only visible to her, she said: “You don't know me? You don't know me?”¹⁶

What is hell like?

To help us figure this one out let's look at a few of the common descriptions for hell:

Fire:

For example, in Mark 9:47-48 Jesus says, “And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where [and here he quotes Isaiah 66:24] “the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched.””

Weeping, gnashing of teeth, darkness:

Matthew 12: 41-42 highlights a few of these images: “The Son of Man [Jesus] will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” In Matthew 22:2, 13, 14, we are given more glimpses: “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son... “Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’... “For many are invited, but few are chosen.” In Luke 13:28-29 we read about those who are excluded from God's presence: “There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out.” In Matthew 25: 30 in the parable of the talents/bags-of-gold, we are told this about the servant who did not serve his Master well: “And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Chains of darkness:

2 Peter 2:4 reads: “For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them in chains of darkness to be held for judgment...”

We should pause for a moment on the seriousness of the language that is used here to talk about hell: Fire, weeping and gnashing of teeth, and darkness, and chains of darkness. If these images don't make you tremble, you're not paying attention or taking them seriously.

How long does it last?

Eternal punishment is just that: *eternal, forever*. Keep in mind that some people have argued that hell is a limited time frame. They reference passages like John 3:16 which says: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not *perish* but have eternal life." They cling to the word "perish," suggesting that time in hell must therefore be limited. Others point to Jesus' words in Matthew 10:28 where he says, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell." This is a serious verse. They wonder if Jesus' statement that God can destroy the body and soul in hell means that punishment eventually stops and the person is simply annihilated.

But all of these thoughts need to be contrasted with the bigger picture and more frequent references to hell lasting forever. Eternal life in God's presence is contrasted with eternal punishment away from God's presence. Think of Jesus' words about the final judgment in Matthew 25:46 where he comments on those who will be banished from God's presence and those who will be able to stay in God's presence: "Then they will go away to *eternal* punishment, but the righteous to *eternal* life." The Greek word used here for eternal (*aiionios*) means just that—eternal, or of an unlimited duration of time. That seems to be the scholarly consensus.

Interpretive issues about how hell is described

Having said this, I need to highlight some of the ways that some people have wrestled with these descriptions of hell (descriptions of fire, and gnashing of teeth and utter darkness)—and keep in mind that these are very faithful and intelligent people. What they say are partly in response to certain ambiguities in these descriptions of hell. Are the descriptions of fire and darkness and weeping and gnashing of teeth literal, or are they somewhat metaphorical?

The reason these questions should be taken seriously is because, for example, how can there be "utter darkness" and "fire" at the same time? How can there be no light in this kind of darkness, but at the same time be fire because fire produces light? Similarly, doesn't fire only impact us if we have physical bodies with nerve endings that sense pain? So if we don't have our physical bodies in the afterlife, what difference would fire actually make?

Hyperbole or metaphorical language?

To help address these questions it could be argued that Jesus and other biblical writers use common language and words people knew *to express a deeper meaning about something*.

Let me give some examples about using language to express a deeper meaning. In Luke 14:26 Jesus says that “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.” The word ‘hate’ is strong language, especially for a parent! But in other places he affirms the commandment to honour your father and mother (like in Mark 10:19). And you can’t honour them and hate them at the same time. So what must be happening is that Jesus is using a strong term (hate) to convey the idea that our very first loyalty must be to Jesus, even before our parents. It will be an intense loyalty by comparison. He is using strong words to convey a deeper meaning.

Another example is Matthew 7:5 when Jesus says to someone that they should remove plank out of their own eye before they address the speck in someone else’s eye. He’s obviously not referring to a physical plank. He’s using strong words to convey a deeper meaning. Theologian William Crocket sums up why this might be: “When the writers use fire to describe judgment or hell, they use a convenient image that will demonstrate the burning wrath of God.”¹⁷

John Calvin, the great Reformed theologian of the 1500’s who had a great influence on Protestant thought, and a massive continuing influence on modern evangelicals, when commenting on the phrase “eternal fire” in Matthew 3:12 said: “We may conclude from many passages of Scripture, that it [eternal fire] is a metaphorical expression.” A more well-known figure in modern times, the late Billy Graham, said this: “I have often wondered if hell is a terrible burning within our hearts for God, to fellowship with God, a fire that we can never quench.”

Avoid at all costs; hell is no less serious

But these ideas shouldn’t make us doubt the seriousness of hell. Scripture also teaches us we should avoid it like the plague—at all costs. For example, in Matthew 5:30 we read, “And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.” So again, Jesus is not saying you should actually cut off your body parts; but his meaning is that you should make every possible and serious effort to wage war against the sin in your life and avoid hell.

In a book about hell, pastor Frances Chan, has quite a lengthy chapter about some of the issues around interpretation and how to understand them. And he ends it with a sobering comment: “Don’t get so lost in deciphering that you forget to tremble.”¹⁸

Lastly: What is hell for?

To help us answer this question, let’s turn to Matthew 13:36-43. Jesus has just taught about the parable of the weeds which starts like this in verses 24 to 26: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.” He goes on to talk about a harvest when

the weeds will be separated from the wheat. It's obviously a metaphor for final judgment. In verse 36, his disciples ask Jesus to explain it more clearly to them. This is what he says:

³⁷ He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸ The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. ⁴² They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear.

I think that in this verse there is a powerful teaching about what hell is for, and it is found in verse 41. It is punishment for "everything that causes sin and all who do evil."

And there's the crux—and we'll talk about it more next week, but the issue is sin. Why? Because we cannot dwell with God forever in eternity if we have not found a way to deal with the problem of sin in our lives. We simply can't do it. Sin is not honouring God as we should; it is neglecting his commands toward himself and toward our neighbours; it is living by messed up priorities; it is missing the mark. God is holy and just and righteous; and if we sin (which we all do), we simply cannot live in the presence of a perfect and righteous God.

So, what is hell for? I think this story teaches us that hell separation from God that is punishment for "everything that causes sin and all who do evil."

But before we end this sermon, I want to assure you of something. Even though we all sin—as it says in Romans 3:23 "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"—there is hope. Our sin does not have to separate us from God forever. Hell is avoidable. Heaven is possible. And the answer is found in Jesus Christ. That's what we'll fully explore next week. And it is good news for all of us!

Summary

Let's summarize what we've explored today. First, we debunked three untruths about hell. The first untruth is that hell is only reserved for the ultra-wicked. Incorrect. The second untruth is that hell could never exist because it is inconsistent with a God of love. Incorrect. The third untruth is that hell is a big party where anything goes. Incorrect.

What is hell? It is the absence of God's presence. What is hell like? Various phrases are used to describe a horrible, eternal place of punishment that should be avoided at all costs. What is hell for? It is for "everything that causes sin and all who do evil."

Last week when I spoke and taught about heaven, I said it is a place all of us should want to go, and it should also be a place we want everyone we know to go. This week as I teach

about hell, let me say this: Hell is a place none of us should want to go, and it should also be a place where we want no one we know to go either.

I know this is all difficult. A lot of us have a lot of praying to do, and a lot of thinking to do about all of this. Some of you may go back and study your Bible, talk to some people and do some more reading. I hope you do. And we all need to anticipate next week's message seriously about how, therefore, in light of what we've discussed we become right with God. In many ways, what I've said today will only make sense when paired with what I'm going to teach about next week.

But in and through it all I want all of us to remember this: *Jesus loves you too much to lie to you.*

Final thought: God is good

Marshall Shelley tells the story of the miraculous birth of his son.¹⁹ When the child was in the womb they learned that it had an abnormal heart. This was obviously difficult for Marshall and his wife Susan. They were told their baby would probably not survive birth. The child might not even make it that far. So they prayed and wrestled with God. It was obviously very difficult for them. They prayed for a miracle. When the time for delivery came, the child was born, alive. They were so healthy. Marshall writes, "He was a healthy pink, and we saw his chest rise and fall. The breath of life. Thank you, God."

But two minutes later, the child stopped breathing. He died. Joy was followed by misery. The nurse asked if they had a name for the baby. And the mother said, "Toby." She also offered an explanation for that choice of name. "It's short for a biblical name, Tobiah," she said, "which means 'God is good.'"

The Shelleys believed that God is good when everything is good and makes sense to us, and even when everything is not good and when it doesn't make sense to us. I think this is a helpful thing to keep in mind when thinking about hell. It's not something that we think is good. Nor is it something that we fully understand. But even still, we trust that God is actually who he says he is—a good God, a loving God, a righteous God, and a holy God—when we understand it, and even when we don't. Jesus loves us too much to lie to us.

We've covered a lot today. Next week we bring it all home, and how we become right with God, and have eternal peace with God, not only in this life, but in the next.

Let's keep journeying together and living wisely—not based on what we *want* to be true, but on what actually is.

Amen.

Part 4 of 4: **WHO GOES WHERE? (AND WHO DECIDES?)**



Pastor Matthew Ruttan | January 27, 2019
Westminster Presbyterian Church, Barrie, ON

Friends, today is Part 4 in our teaching series called *Heaven and Hell: What does the Bible teach about what is true (instead of what we want to be true)*. It's something I've approached with anticipation, with hope, and also with fear and trembling. What got me initially thinking about this series was a Gallup poll I heard about said that 81% of people surveyed believed in heaven and only 69% believed in hell. We like to believe in things we like, like heaven, but we don't like to believe in things we don't, like hell.

And yet, Jesus talked about them both and took them both seriously. Therefore, that's what this series is all about. I firmly believe we are to live wisely—not based on what we *want* to be true, but on what actually is.

Here's where we've come so far. We've talked about the reliability of the Bible as our source of knowledge and truth. We've talked about the awesomeness of heaven and the horror of hell.

Today's question is: What makes you right with God, and what makes you wrong with God? In other words, what makes a person *right* with God so that they are granted heaven after they die, and what makes a person *wrong* with God so that they are separated from his presence in hell when they die? In other words, who goes where? And who decides? If you've ever wondered about that question of unparalleled significance (and even if you haven't), then this sermon is for you.

Here's how we'll proceed: First, we'll debunk three untruths about who goes where. Second, we'll talk about the crux of the issue which is "the sin problem." Third, we'll talk about the solution to the sin problem. Fourth, we'll talk about who decides these things. Fifth, we'll talk about what we should do with all this information.

First: Three untruths about what makes you right or wrong with God—i.e. who goes where:

The first untruth is that all good people go to heaven.

We've all heard it at funerals: 'Well, they were a good person so they are now in heaven.' Several years ago someone I knew had a parent pass away and were trying to figure out what to say to comfort their children. They asked me if, the next time we saw each other, I could explain to their children that nice people go to heaven when they die and that therefore Nana was okay. I said that we should probably have an adult conversation about it first because it didn't quite work like that and they should probably be aware of the actual biblical teaching before I spoke with their children. Suffice it to say, I never heard back from them and they never followed up to have the conversation!

Now I have to be clear. There are a lot of good people who go to heaven. But not *all* good people go to heaven. The issue here is that a lot of people define 'good' in various ways. But the teaching we find in the Bible is that what makes you right with God is not 'goodness,' or even how morally well you have performed in life. This comes as a surprise to a lot of people. A lot of people—both inside the church and outside the church—think this whole Christianity thing is about 'how to be a good person.' But it's not. Is it a part of it? Absolutely? But it's not actually the main thing.

The second untruth is that hell is just for the ultra-wicked.

I won't spend much time on this because I talked about it last week. If people agree that there could be such a thing as hell, they concede it could only be for people like Hitler or child molesters. But again, hell is not *just* for people we might think of as the ultra-wicked.

The third untruth is that people who you like go up, and people who you don't go down.

Now I don't think any of us would admit that we might think this way! But it's a train of thought that can curl around in our craniums. Many of us think that our perspective on the world is basically the right one, and so that must be what God thinks too. And so it follows that if other people have a *different* perspective on the world than we do, then they must be at odds with God as well.

There's a poem called *Heaven's Surprise* that captures the idea well. I don't know who wrote it, but it's about someone who has supposedly died and has gone to heaven. However, they're shocked at who is there because many of the people they see are people they didn't like while on earth or people who did mean things to them. The last two verses go like this:

*I nudged Jesus, 'What's the deal?' I would love to hear your take.
How'd all these sinners get up here? God must've made a mistake.
'And why's everyone so quiet, so somber—give me a clue.'
'Child,' he said, 'they're all in shock.
They never thought they'd be seeing you.'*

Although it's only a poem, what I take from this is that the ultimate Judge is God himself. He is the one who sets the standard; he is the one who holds the keys; and his wisdom is higher and greater than any one of us with our own comparatively small pea-sized brains. The people in heaven or hell aren't always the ones you might expect.

Second: The crux of the issue: "the sin problem"

Do you know how people sometimes say, 'Do you want the bad news first, or the good news first?' We usually want the bad news first so we can get it out of the way and end on a positive note. So that's what we're going to do here as well. The bad news is called "the sin problem." Let me explain.

All of us have a sin problem—and this threatens to separate us from God forever. In Romans 3:23 the apostle Paul says it very succinctly like this: "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." That means the people he was writing to in ancient Rome 2000 years ago sinned and fell short of God's glory. Paul himself in 1 Timothy 1:15 said he was the worst sinner! And it's one of those statements that extends forward into modern times, meaning you and I have also sinned and fallen short of God's glory. Your grade two teacher has sinned and fallen short of God's glory. Even impressive people like Mother Teresa has sinned and fallen short of God's glory. (By the way, she would be the first one to admit that to you.) And this threatens to separate us from God forever.

But, what is sin, anyway?

Sin is not honouring God as we should; it is neglecting his commands toward himself and toward our neighbours; it is living by messed up priorities; it is missing the mark.

Kevin DeYoung, a man I saw at a conference last year who is a theologian from North Carolina, has this to say in an article simply called *Sin*: "Most fundamentally and most foundationally, what's wrong with the world is that God's image-bearers do not love, reverence, worship, and obey the one true God as they ought."²⁰

So it's not just wicked people who have a sin problem that threatens to separate us from God, but it's all of us—people like you and me who are nice and sometimes go to church and pay our taxes and give to charity and occasionally mow our neighbour's lawn. *All* of us have the capacity for both good and evil.

But the problem isn't just that we have a sin problem, and that it threatens to separate us from God forever, but that *we wildly underestimate the seriousness of our sin, brokenness and moral failures.*

One reason for this is because *we don't realize who we are sinning against on a day-to-day basis.* Denny Burk tries to explain it in this way.²¹ Let's say you're walking down the street and you see someone sitting on a park bench and they're picking the legs off of a caterpillar. You might think it was kind of weird, but you probably wouldn't do anything about it. But what if it was a mouse? Would you do something? Maybe. But what if it was a dog? You'd probably intervene. We love dogs! Now what if it was a baby? If you are like me, you'd run over there and probably punch them in the face. (Did I just say that?) And what if they were trying to do it to your mother, or even the Queen? Okay, that's kind of strange, but you get the point. *The crime seems to be more serious depending on who it's against.* God is of infinite value and importance; so the reason our sin is so serious is because sin is primarily against God. If I gossip about someone, or if I look lustfully at a woman who isn't my wife, or if I am greedy, or if I pour toxins into the river, not only am I sinning against other people, but even more than that I am sinning primarily against God who is of infinite value and worth. That makes my sin even more serious.

But many people in our day simply underestimate this. For example, Professor Jonathan Haidt teaches at New York's Stern School of Business. In his book *The Righteous Mind*, he explains an experiment by some researchers.²² They were trying to explore what makes people think something is right or wrong. If I get his argument right, it seems that a lot of people only think something is wrong if it harms another person. If no one is getting "harmed" then it's okay, right? To explore this they conducted an experiment and asked a bunch of people to respond to a made-up scenario. They were told that an adult brother and sister went away to a resort and decided to have sex with one another. The people in the research experiment were told that no one they knew would find out about what had happened, and they were guaranteed that no children would result from the encounter. Since they were both consenting adults, and since they wouldn't be harming anyone, was it okay? 80% said it was wrong—but *they couldn't say why.* They had a sense it was wrong, but *they weren't actually able to identify a reason.* I think this happens when we forget what the standard is for right and wrong. Incest is wrong because it goes against God's teachings, commands and laws; it goes against his design for human intimacy and sexuality. So whether or not something harms someone is of a secondary nature. It may be a sin against them, but it is primarily a sin against God who has created us with a certain purpose in mind and who knows what is best for us. Many people forget this, but as followers of Jesus, none of us should.

God is holy and just and righteous; and if we sin, we simply cannot eternally live in the presence of a perfect and righteous God. Last week we said that hell is for, according to Matthew 13:41, "everything that causes sin and all who do evil." Well, guess what? That's not just who we might consider the "ultra-wicked," or just for those who do horrendous things, but for us too because none of us are perfect, and all sin is first and foremost against God himself.

The bad news continues:

All of us will have to give an account before God for the sin in our lives. In 2 Corinthians 5:10 Paul writes, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ...” In Matthew 12:36 Jesus says that “everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken.” In Revelation 22:11 Jesus talks about his return and says “I will give to each person according to what they have done.” In Romans 2 we learn that each person will be repaid according to what they have done and there will be “distress for every human being who does evil...” (verses 6, 9).

So, to answer our question, what makes us wrong with God? Sin. It is what has the capacity to eternally separate us from God. This bad news makes the prospect of World War Three seem like a pleasantry.

Third: The solution to our sin problem

So, we’ve dealt with the very bad news. And you’re probably thinking, ‘Wow, I’m glad that’s over!’ So, here’s the good news. The good news is that there is a solution, a remedy, to “the sin problem” in our lives—and it is freely open to all people, no matter who they are and no matter what they have done.

And it is Jesus Christ.

But it’s not that Jesus teaches us how to be good and earn our way into heaven. Does Jesus teach us to love God and others? Absolutely! But what makes us right with God—both in this life and the next—is not our ability to be good people and “earn” anything. Let me explain.

Why did Jesus come?

We just had Christmas last month. And what did Jesus come to do? Well, many things, but one of them, as we are told in the Christmas story itself in Matthew 1:21, is that he came to “save his people *from their sins*.” He is the bridge between humans who are sinful (you, me, the ones we love, and everyone else), and God. In John 1:28 John the Baptist proclaims this about Jesus: “Look, the Lamb of God, *who takes away the sin of the world!*” Jesus has come to deal comprehensively with our sin problem.

The language of a ransom is also used, where someone pays something to liberate someone else from a dire situation: In Matthew 20:28 Jesus himself said that he “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” He frees us from being hostages to our own sin and its consequences.

This is why the cross is so important. We have it in our churches and display crosses around our necks. By giving his life for ours, Jesus pays the price and penalty for our sin. He takes it away from us. On the cross, he serves the sentence that you and I deserve. What

he has done on our behalf is why “the sin problem” doesn’t count against us when we stand before God.

So does it just happen? Do we have to do anything to access this wonderful forgiveness so that we can enjoy peace and harmony and eternity with God?

How does it work?

Yes. We have to do something: We believe that Jesus is in fact who he said he was, God’s Son, trust what he did for us on the cross, and ask for forgiveness. And guess what? God gives it to us! It’s free. You don’t have to earn it—at all! All you have to do is trust that Jesus has done this for you.

The last time I checked the Boy Scouts had merit badges. The idea is that you do different tasks and earn badges—for camping, helping the elderly, etc. Many people think that is how it works in terms of heaven. Just get enough morality badges on earth and you’ll earn your place a spot in God’s good graces. But it doesn’t work like that. When you place your faith in Christ, he takes your sin off of you (for free) and gives you eternity. When Jesus burst onto the scene 2000 years ago, and when Christianity started to spread like wildfire, this was incredibly good news. It blew people’s minds! ‘What? You mean we have peace and eternity with God as a free gift?!’

In his book *The Grace of God*, Andy Stanley, writes: “eternal life isn’t a reward for good people; it’s God’s gift to forgiven people.”²³

Here is how it is expressed in the Bible. In a prophecy about Jesus the coming Messiah in Isaiah 53:5: “he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.” Ephesians 1:7 says, “in [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.” In verse 8 Paul writes, “for it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God...” John 3:18 says, “Whoever believes in [Jesus] is not condemned...” Romans 5:1 says that because of that faith in Christ “we have peace with God...” Verse 8 says that “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” And John 3:36: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on them.”

This is also what Jesus himself says. In John 11:25 he says, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live even though they die...” [In this context, he is referring to *eternal* life.] In John 14:6 he says, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

When you trust that you have an Advocate, Jesus, who has already paid the penalty for your sin (he has done your time and served your sentence on the cross), things are going to go well for you when you stand before God’s judgment seat. Just as I demonstrated a little while ago with our young people, Jesus comes over to you, puts his arm around you and says, ‘This one’s with me. I’ve paid what he/she owes. They’re good.’

What makes you right with God and granted a place in his eternity isn't how good *you've* been, but on how good *Jesus* has been—and all you have to do is accept this gift through faith. Our eternal salvation is based on a Saviour not your behaviour.

Isn't that exclusive?

At this point some argue that this is very exclusive and that Jesus isn't very fair. But I want to argue the opposite point, *that it is wildly inclusive*. So many religions all around the world think that your salvation (what makes you at peace with God in this life and the next, what “saves” you) is all based on your moral performance and how good you are. But with Jesus it's totally different. It's about grace—a word which means free generosity you don't even deserve! If we simply trust in him and ask for forgiveness, he *gives* us eternity! That's a part of why Jesus has been so appealing through so many centuries. Why do you think so many people who have messed up their lives like Jesus? It's because he welcomes them and gives them eternity based on what he has done for them and not on what they have or haven't done for themselves. It's a wide open gate for people regardless of how much money they make, what gender they are, or what colour their skin is, or what language they speak, or what country they're from. Jesus blows the doors wide open—everything can be ours if we put our faith in him. He deals with our sin problem because, on account of his great love for us, he pays the penalty for our sin, gives us right standing before God, and opens wide the gates of heaven.

Is it a magic formula?

At this point, some people think, ‘That sounds great. It sounds like a magic formula. Why not just say you believe in Jesus and that he can forgive your sin and then just do whatever you want?’

But it doesn't work like that. Think of it like this. And this is an illustration from John Ortberg that I've adapted to my own situation.²⁴ Imagine on my wedding day, I got up to the front of the church and the pastor is there and Laura and I make vows to love one another and journey through this life together. And then, after the party, I say to Laura, ‘Honey, what is the least I can do in this relationship to stay married to you?’ How do you think that would go? Not very well! So in terms of journeying with Jesus, it's important to ask whether our faith in him is genuine.

As you read through the New Testament in the Bible, there are actually indications the text gives us to help us know whether our faith is genuine or not.

First, here are some stumbling blocks that consistently come up.

One stumbling block to authentic faith in Jesus is *money*. In Matthew 19: 23-24 Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” And in Luke 16:13: “You cannot serve both God and

money.” There is something about money that brings out the worst in us, and which can distract us from actually trusting God. So we need to ask ourselves, are we using our money to just build up our own little kingdoms, or are we using our resources for God’s glory and *his* kingdom? Jesus teaches us that focussing too much on money and not enough on him creates a major barrier to authentic faith in him and heaven.

Another stumbling block to authentic faith in Jesus is *unforgiveness*. In Matthew 6:14-15 in the Sermon on the Mount, just after teaching the disciples the Lord’s Prayer, he says, “if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” A similar lesson is learned in Matthew 18:35. I’m not saying it’s easy; and I realize that some people will struggle with it their whole lives. And remember that forgiveness does not mean that forget or condone what someone did. But the point is this: If we do not forgive other people, I think it casts serious doubt on whether or not we actually take our own sin seriously and trust that God has forgiven our own sins. If our faith in Jesus is genuine, I think we will be compelled to forgive. Forgiven people forgive people.

Second, here are some signs that your faith in Jesus as Saviour and forgiver is authentic; these should give you confidence.

One is what we just talked about. It is a *willingness to forgive*.

Another is that you are showing *evidence of God’s presence in your life*. The biblical language is “producing fruit.” If you have put your faith in Jesus, the Holy Spirit enters into you and you will start to see how God is working through you. It may happen in different ways, and it may be slower in some than others; but inevitably, it will happen. The most frequently cited passage about this is Galatians 5:22-23, the “fruit of the Spirit”: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

And this is a very significant (and often overlooked) because it needs to be stressed that we are not just saved *from* something, but *for* something. We’re not just saved from hell and saved *from* the consequences of our sin, but we are saved *for* something. And that something is to get in on the ways Jesus is bringing heaven to earth. C.S. Lewis was a theologian and writer I’ve really come to admire. He writes: “If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were precisely those who thought most of the next.”²⁵ What he means is that the Christians who take heaven seriously are the ones who do the most to transform their present world to look more like it. They are motivated to get in on the loving work that Jesus is doing to bring heaven to earth.

A highly respected New Testament scholar from England named N.T. Wright says, “salvation only does become what it’s meant to do when those who have been saved, are being saved, and will one day fully be saved realize that they are saved not as souls but as wholes and not for themselves alone but for what God now longs to do through them.”²⁶

In 2 Corinthians 6:1 the apostle Paul says, “As God’s co-workers we urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain.” It’s a way of saying that we shouldn’t receive the free gift of God’s forgiveness and grace without purpose. We should get off our duffs and do something with it! When we do so it brings God glory and gives us joy and a meaningful sense of purpose.

So what makes you right with God? What opens to you the gates of heaven? It’s faith in Jesus because only he can deal with the very serious sin problem in your life. Without him you carry the weight and penalty and consequence of your sin all by yourself as you stand before God one day. Without him I believe we will be found guilty. But with him we will be found innocent. He comes up to us, puts his arm around us and says, ‘S/he is with me; I’ve paid the price for them; they’re good.’

Fourth: Who decides?

Who makes these decisions about the ultimate destination of people? On this we need to be clear. It is not you. And it is not me. It is Jesus. In Acts 10:42 we are told that Jesus will be the “judge of the living and the dead.” We are also told this in 2 Timothy 4:1 and possibly 1 Peter 4:5.

And I think this is very good news. Why? Because he is wiser than we are. He is more understanding than we are. And he is more just than we are. I truly believe that one day, on the other side of death, we will somehow see and understand that every decision he has ever made is the right one.

And because Jesus is the ultimate God, who’s to say that God can’t reach out to someone in ways beyond our knowing, even towards the end of life, and draw them to himself, and give them opportunities to respond ‘Yes’ to him? I’ve seen some amazing things as a pastor, especially toward the end of people’s lives, including moments like these...

David Robertson wrote a book about how to talk to atheists about faith. Speaking about this very thing, he says: “Your calling is not to determine who goes to heaven; your calling is to point the way.”²⁷ And the Way is Jesus.

Fifth: What next? What should we do with all this information?

Having said all this, I want to end with a few thoughts.

First, we’ve covered a tonne of ground in this series. So I want to remind you that if you need clarity on any of these things, or if you need to just process some of it again, you can re-listen to any of the podcasts on our website, or you can ask for a manuscript which will be available starting on Tuesday.

Second, if you are skeptical, you need to pursue your doubts and questions. Pray, study the Bible, read more, talk to people. We are speaking about things of eternal consequence. Take the next step to get better informed and resolve the questions in your head.

Third, for those of us who are sure about our faith in Christ, a word needs to be said about our attitude. Being confident in who Jesus is and what he does for us should not be a reason to be arrogant. We should be *humble*. As it says in a faith statement of this denomination, “in the spirit of humility, as beggars telling others where food is to be found, we point to life in Christ.”²⁸

According to my reading, the people Jesus railed against the most were the highly “religious” people who thought they had it all figured out—they’re usually called Pharisees, a religious group in the first century. As far as I can tell, they’re the ones he warned most about hell. What I think we can learn from this is that a lot of people think that they’re the only ones who know who is in and who is out based on who can keep all the commands the best. But one of the things I find so compelling about Jesus is that he focuses on faith *in him*, and on a spirit of love in all things—not in one’s ability to live a perfect life. Not only that, but because Jesus is in charge and not us, who’s to say that in someone’s last minutes of life, or in a way unknown to us, God can’t reach out to a person in a special way? I again quote David Robertson that our job is not to determine who goes to heaven, but to point the way.

Jesus says, “*I am the way and the truth and the life*” (John 14:6). In Matthew 11:28-30 he says, “Come to *me*, all you who are weary and burdened, and *I will give you rest*. Take *my* yoke upon you and learn from *me*, for *I am gentle and humble in heart*, and you will find rest for your souls. For *my yoke is easy and my burden is light*.” The focus is on him, on finding our rescue and rest and *him*... not in our own ability to be perfect or keep all the rules.

The point is to point to Jesus.

Fourth—and this is a big one—many of us are unsure about how we talk about this to people we love and care about who haven’t yet put their trust in Jesus, and who therefore haven’t yet found a way to deal with the sin problem in their lives. We want the best for them.

In these situations, we are wise to do a few things:

Pray. We need to call on God to ask that he open people’s minds and hearts to who he is and what he can do for them. Never underestimate the power of prayer.

Trust God. The second is to trust God. God created every single person you know, including the ones you love. My sense is that God is continually reaching out to his children, giving them opportunities to get to know him better. So we can trust that God is actually doing that and working people’s hearts. He is, after all, a heavenly Father.

Don’t pretend to be perfect; be loving. People who pretend they are perfect are (a) liars, and (b) dislikable. And we tend to not want to listen to or believe anyone who is a dislikable liar. So don’t be afraid to admit your mistakes and your own questions. And

always seek to be loving. Love and trying to understand someone else's point of view has a way of building bridges.

Point to Jesus. Finally, we can continue to humbly point to Jesus and always be prepared to explain the reason for our hope in him (1 Peter 3:15). Friends, *the point is to point to Jesus.* If we want to share the good news about who God is, and to the reality about heaven and hell and eternity, we need to continually look for and seize upon opportunities to say and show why Jesus is good news and hope and light. He is heaven and salvation's greatest asset: Lewis said that in Christianity you're not faced "with an argument which demands your assent, but with a Person who demands your confidence."²⁹ So point to Jesus. Philosopher and scientist Alister McGrath explains that "All beauty... is derived from the radiance of Jesus Christ."³⁰ So point to Jesus. And as I've said before, Jesus, standing tall and radiating integrity, is a power unto himself of incomparable magnetism. Jesus is the both the journey and the destination. So point to Jesus. In our conversations with the people we love who don't share our faith in him, we don't have to have all the perfect answers and well-oiled arguments and rationales—we are just called to humbly and sincerely look for honest ways to explain and show our hope in Jesus. And then we let God take it from there.

Summary

As the final instalment of this series comes to a close, let me recap today's message:

We started by debunking three untruths. The first untruth is that all good people go to heaven. Incorrect. The second untruth is that hell is *just* for the ultra-wicked. Incorrect. The third untruth is that people who you like go up, and people who you don't go down. Not necessarily! The crux of the issue of what makes us right or wrong with God is "the sin problem." *All* of us have a sin problem—and this threatens to separate us from God forever. But there is good news. The solution to the sin problem is Jesus Christ. By placing our faith in him, trusting that he is who he says he is, and by trusting what he has done for us on the cross and asking forgiveness, he pays the penalty for our sin (the penalty that we deserve but he pays on our behalf), and gives us the free gift of forgiveness, eternity and heaven. This is what makes us right with God, both in this life and the next. As Andy Stanley says, "eternal life isn't a reward for good people; it's God's gift to forgiven people." Stumbling blocks to genuine faith in Jesus are money and unforgiveness. But signs of genuine faith are a spirit of forgiveness, and showing the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. We aren't just saved *from* something but *for* something. We're not just saved *from* the consequence of the sin in our lives, but *for* a purpose: to get in on the ways Jesus is renovating the world and bringing heaven to earth with his truth and love. This gives God glory and us joy. In terms of final judgment, who decides all this? Not you and not me, but Jesus. As Robertson said: "Your calling is not to determine who goes to heaven; your calling is to point the way." And the way is Jesus. Finally, what should we do with all this information? If we have doubts or questions we should pursue them. We should be humble, pointing others to Jesus like beggars showing other beggars where to find food. And, as we think through sharing this knowledge with those we love but who don't share

our beliefs, we pray, we trust God, we don't pretend to be perfect (we love), and we look for opportunities to point to Jesus and share our hope.

Final thought

In his book *3:16 – The Numbers of Hope*, Max Lucado tells a story about a man in his final hours in his battle with cancer. But he had come to know Jesus, and speak about his hope in heaven. This man had an experience that may have been a vision, a glimpse into what heaven was like before he was actually there. “I’m living in two realities,” he said to his wife who was sitting at his bedside. After having seen what he saw, he asked her, “Am I special?” “What do you mean, special?” she asked. He replied: “That I should be allowed to have all this?”³¹

Yes he is. He is in fact special. Because he was perfect? No. Because he had all the answers? No. But because he had put his faith in Jesus and therefore received the free gift God gave him. Listen again very intently to John 3:16, which is our final word in this series. It is perhaps the most famous Bible verse in the history of the world, and for very good reason: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

Friends, let’s keep journeying together and living wisely—not based on what we *want* to be true, but on what actually is.

Amen.

¹ As referenced in Jud Wilhite, *The God of Yes: How Faith Makes All Things New* (New York: Faith Words, 2014), 156.

² As referenced in Max Lucado, *3:16 – The Numbers of Hope* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 77.

³ As quoted in: Lucado, *3:16*, 85.

⁴ Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 107.

⁵ As told in: John Ortberg, *Soul Keeping: Caring for the Most Important Part of You* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 109.

⁶ See Mark A. Noll, *From Every Tribe and Nation: A Historian’s Discovery of the Global Christian Story* (Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2014). In chapter 19 (Explorations with Pen in Hand) he writes: “Yet from another angle, the more confusion that trying to look at the whole world created, the greater the basic simplicity of what such an effort revealed. Jesus as Son of God was always at the centre. The Scriptures provided an ever-present template. Transformed lives—along with an almost universal recognition of falling short of Christian ideals showed up everywhere.”

⁷ Mary Henley Rubio and Elizabeths Hillman Waterston, eds, *The Complete Journals of L.M. Montgomery: The PEI Years, 1901-1937* (Don Mills, Oxford, 1985/1987), 357.

⁸ Gavin Ortlund, *Looking Forward to a Heaven we can Imagine*. This is an article published on March 9, 2019 at: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/looking-forward-to-a-heaven-we-can-imagine/>

⁹ As quoted on Wilhite, *The God of Yes*, 125.

¹⁰ As told in: Max Lucado, *You’ll Get Through This: Help and hope for turbulent times* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 125.

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- ¹¹ Wilhite, *The God of Yes*, 162.
- ¹² As told in Billy Graham, *Nearing Home: Life, Faith, and Finishing Well* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011), 84.
- ¹³ Tim Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Riverhead, 2008), 71.
- ¹⁴ This is from Lewis's book *The Problem of Pain*. I've quoted it here from the article *7 Truths About Hell* by J.D. Greear published on Mary 11, 2015 at: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/7-truths-about-hell/>
- ¹⁵ Erik Raymond, *Is Hell For Real: And other questions about judgment, eternity and the God of love* (The Good Book Company, 2017), 49.
- ¹⁶ As told in: Lucado, *3:16*, 83.
- ¹⁷ Crockett makes this argument in an article titled "The Metaphorical View" in: Stanley N. Gundry & William Crockett, eds, *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 53.
- ¹⁸ Francis Chan and Preston Sprinkle, *Erasing Hell: What God said about eternity, and the things we've made up* (Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2011), 87.
- ¹⁹ As told in: Chan & Sprinkle, *Erasing Hell*, 140.
- ²⁰ Kevin DeYoung, "Sin" in: D.A. Carson ed., *NIV Zondervan Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 2645.
- ²¹ As referenced in: Raymond, *Is hell for real?*, 52.
- ²² Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 45.
- ²³ Andy Stanley, *The Grace of God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 163.
- ²⁴ Adapted from: John Ortberg: *Eternity is Now in Session: A radical rediscovery of what Jesus really taught about salvation, eternity, and getting to the good place* (Carol Stream: Tyndale Momentum, 2018), 37.
- ²⁵ I don't have the exact reference page but this is from Lewis' book *Mere Christianity*.
- ²⁶ N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 200.
- ²⁷ David Robertson, *Engaging with Atheists: Understanding their world, sharing good news* (The Good Book Company, 2014), 110.
- ²⁸ *Living Faith* is a subordinate standard of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. This quote is from section 9.2.1.
- ²⁹ C.S. Lewis, "On Obstancy in Belief," *C.S. Lewis: Essay Collection* (London: Harper-Collins, 2000), 213-14.
- ³⁰ Alister E. McGrath, *Mere Apologetics: How to help seekers & skeptics find faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), 115.
- ³¹ Lucado, *3:16*, 84.