

Heaven and Hell Bible Study
Christ the King Lutheran Church
Commerce, GA

Session 2: Getting to Heaven and Hell

In preparation for this session, read pages 4-10 in *A Simple Explanation of Heaven and Hell*

In the first session we learned that eternity was part of God's plan from the beginning. We were not designed to die, but to live eternally with God. Death entered the world because of our sin. But God also had a plan to restore life, in both body and soul, to its eternal state. Heaven and hell are real places. They are not just metaphors for good and bad experiences as some see heaven and hell on earth. Indeed, we see both God's wrath and mercy on display in our fallen world-but not in their full measure. Eternity in a place separate from what we now experience is necessary for this and is clearly taught in the Bible. As some have said, "For the Christian earth is the closest thing to hell they will ever experience, for the non-Christian earth is the closest thing to heaven they will ever experience."

How does one end up in either heaven or hell? This class will examine the answer to that question. It will also answer when we begin experiencing this. Finally, hell is a difficult doctrine for some people so we need to understand why it is necessary.

A Word on Election

The doctrine of election (predestination) is clearly taught in the Scripture. However, understanding exactly what it means has been a point of debate for many Christians. In short, we know that God is in control of all things. We know that He has all knowledge of the past, present, and future. Both "free will" in terms of "choosing God", and "double predestination" in which God chooses some to be saved and some to be damned (thus Jesus only died for some) are not correct. God knows exactly who will be saved and be with Him eternally. The Bible also tells us that it is God's desire that none perish and all come to a knowledge of the truth. How do we reconcile these two truths? We cannot logically do so, but we believe it in faith because this is what God reveals to us in His Word.

Stating the Obvious

1. God is _____ meaning that He rules over all things.
2. When one is redeemed (saved) and thus will spend eternity in heaven, it is all _____ doing.
3. When one is damned and thus spends eternity in hell it is all _____ _____.
4. To reach heaven or hell, one must _____ _____.

We have discussed "reaching the destination" on a "macro" level in terms of election. Now, let's look at it on a more "micro" level as to each individual (from the aspect that we each experience).

Getting to Heaven

Note: For these questions there are many more verses that could be looked up as the Scripture teaches these things consistently. In the interest of time, only a few examples are given.

1. Read Exodus 33:20, Leviticus 19:2, Isaiah 66:24, St. Matthew 5:48, and Romans 1:18. What truth do we draw from these verses?
2. Read Psalm 130:3, Isaiah 64:6, Romans 3:11-13/Psalm 53:3 Romans 3:23, Ephesians 2:1, 3, and James 2:10. What sobering truth do we come to from these verses?

In summary: _____ deserves to go to hell.

3. What is our hope then? Read Joel 2:13, St. John 1:29, St. John 19:30, Romans 5:8, Romans 6:23, and Ephesians 2:4-9.

Jesus took our _____ as the one time perfect sacrifice for sins. We receive this forgiveness (His righteousness becomes ours) by _____ through _____.

4. But what of good works? Are they required to enter heaven? See St. Matthew 25:31-46, 2 Corinthians 5:10. How are we to understand this?

Put simply, one gets to heaven through Jesus. There is no other way (see St. John 14:6) because it is only in Jesus that our sins can 100% be washed away. We cannot save ourselves. Other people cannot save us. It is only through Jesus as the perfect law-keeping God-man who died and rose again that we may live. When one receives the gift of faith by the Holy Spirit working through the means of grace, their eternal destination is heaven.

5. There is _____ we can do to enter heaven. It is only through what God has done for us and His showing of mercy to us that we may reach heaven. In His timing, our physical lives on earth will end and He will call us to our eternal home, carried there by His angels.

On "Soul Sleep"

Some teach an idea called "soul sleep". This means that when we die, our souls are in a type of unconscious sleep or "suspended animation" until Judgment Day. So we don't really experience anything until then.

6. Where would this idea come from? See St. John 11:11-14, Acts 13:36, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14, and the account of Jesus raising Jairus' daughter (St. Matthew 9). How is death referred to in these passages?

7. So does this mean that there is credibility to the "soul sleep" idea? Read what Jesus says to the thief on the cross in St. Luke 24:43, what St. Stephen saw as he was being stoned in Acts 7:55-56. Also note that in St. Luke 16:19-31 (we will look at this more later in the study) that the rich man and Lazarus were conscious in eternity. Read what St. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:8.

8. So how is this best explained? First of all "sleep" and "rest" from the trials, persecutions, and toils of this life is a positive way to describe leaving this current earth. And upon physical death our _____ rest/sleep in the grave and our _____ are consciously with the Lord. They are reunited at the Resurrection on the Last Day.

Getting to Hell

If Jesus has made provision by His blood (which is enough to forgive the sins of the whole world) for people to enter heaven, why doesn't everyone just go there? How do people end up in hell? For this we must build on what we have already learned. We must also understand that salvation must be individually received. The payment has been made for sin, but this does you no good until you receive it (examples). It must be delivered (through the means of Grace: Word and Sacrament). While we cannot "choose" to receive God's grace, we can choose to reject it.

9. Read St. John 5:28-29, Romans 2:8-9, and Revelation 21:8. Also consider what we have already looked at with the "sheep and goats" in Matthew 25 as well as the numerous other passages that speak of the Final Judgment.

It is clear that there is an _____ punishment for the wicked. Hell (although many deny its literal existence) clearly exists.

10. Consider what we looked at in questions #1 and #2. In summary, to enter heaven (paradise) one must be as _____ (perfect) as God. No one is righteous because all have _____.

11. We also learned that the answer to this is that God sent Jesus in our place. He earned righteousness for us as He paid our sin debt in our place. His righteousness becomes our righteousness (imputation) when we receive Christ in faith. Read St. John 3:18, 3:36, and St. Mark 16:16. From this we see that those under the condemnation (wrath) of God are in this condition because of _____ -specifically rejecting belief (faith) in Jesus Christ because He is the one that saves.

12. To summarize as to how someone ends up in hell:

- A. They remain in a state of sin. They have rebelled against God by continuing in unrepentant rebellion against Him and His Law. Thus the wrath of God abides upon them.
- B. They do not have saving faith (belief, trust) in Jesus, thus they have rejected the one remedy for their sin.

Note: When trying to explain this to someone who is confused about it or an unbeliever, it is generally more helpful to focus on “A”.

In Defense of Hell

As our booklet said, “hell is a hard doctrine.” Heaven doesn’t need much of an apologetic defense. People like the idea of heaven (even if their vision of what is like is often not what the Bible teaches) and they almost always think they deserve to go there (hell is just for “really bad people” like Hitler or Osama bin Laden) because they are a “good person”. But the doctrine of hell is a different story. Even among those who claim to be followers of Christ there have been many attempts to “soften” or even remove the doctrine of hell (examples). And for a sinful world, it is a doctrine that they often see as “unfair” and “unreasonable”. The reasons that people have trouble with, or even deny, hell is for two main reasons: a misunderstanding of the nature and character of God and an absence of a clear understanding of God’s Law.

13. “My God would never create a place like hell.” How could we respond to this?

Note: A big part of this is that many people have a *backwards* understanding in terms of sin and righteousness. They begin with the assumption that everyone is “good” and may do some “bad” things. Thus the assumption is that everyone pretty much deserves heaven and God would be “mean” to send people there. This is counter to what the Scripture teaches that all people are sinners “bad”, but are capable at times of doing good things “works”-but these good works can never bring us to the level of perfection required by God. The truth (as we have noted) is that all people deserve hell, but God is merciful in making the way we can receive forgiveness and thus reach heaven.

14. God is indeed love. He is merciful and desires to show grace. He does not want anyone to go to hell (see 2 Peter 3:9). Hell was originally not created for people, but for the devil and his angels (see St. Matthew 25:41). But we must never forget that God is Holy, pure, and righteous. He must pour out His wrath upon wickedness. But since God is God, could He not do anything? Could he not just “give us a pass” understanding that “no one is perfect”?

15. The answer to #14 surprises many people. Even though God is all powerful, there are some things He cannot do. They all tie back to the fact that since God is holy and perfect, He cannot violate His very nature. This is actually a very comforting truth, because we know that when God promises something it is true and will come to pass. He will not “change his mind” or

“bend the rules”. In considering the doctrine of God’s wrath against sin and the existence of hell, if God were to not follow through on this it would mean that:

- God is a _____ since He has clearly told us hell is real and the wicked will end up there.
- God is not perfectly _____, if sin could dwell in His direct presence.
- God is not _____. By overlooking sin, justice is not served. This turns God into an inept or corrupt judge who can be bribed (which is essentially what one trying to justify themselves by works is doing). Without hell there would be many crimes that escape justice.
- The mission of Jesus makes no _____. God sent His own Son to the world to suffer and die for what then? *“Nobody needs a Gospel if there’s no judgment; if there’s no law. If God is not a God of judgment, if there’s no such thing as hell, what good is the Gospel? The Gospel tells us that we’re saved from the wrath that is to come.”* R.C. Sproul

Do we want a “god” like this?

The image of “god” as a kind, somewhat forgetful, grandfather in a sweater up on a cloud is far from the Triune God revealed in the pages of the Bible. The second major stumbling block for people who dismiss the idea of hell is a misunderstanding of God’s Law. The objections sound like this, *“OK, I have done some bad things, but my good outweighs the bad. Why would God condemn me (or others) for some “little sins”? It’s not like I am a serial killer or Hitler!”*

We have already covered the nature of sin and how serious it is. Unfortunately, overall the modern church has done a very poor job in preaching the law of God. In fact it is completely missing or so watered down it is unrecognizable in many cases. We must understand that the Law needs to be thundered in all its severity and the Gospel preached in all its beauty. Without a robust preaching of the Law, is it any wonder that many people do not have the proper view of it? If the words “sin, wrath, judgment, hell” are not spoken of because they might “turn seekers off”, it is not surprising that people would get the impression that their sin is “not that big of a deal”? On the other end of the spectrum, if “fire and brimstone” is only preached without a proper including of the Law as to why there is “fire and brimstone” then is it any wonder that people would develop a view of God that is one of a vengeful “lighting bolt thrower”? Is there any mystery as to why one may say they “believe in Jesus” as simply a “fire insurance”? As C.F.W. Walther so giftedly taught, we must “properly divide Law and Gospel.”

Here are some other things to consider in regard to the “reasonableness” of hell:

16. In responding to the “little sins” faulty idea, it is helpful to present the scenario of the same sin committed against a _____ person/entity. If you, for example, lie to your child, spouse, boss, or government the resulting consequences are very different. Now consider God’s standing.

17. Consider what we know heaven truly is. It is a place where God’s people dwell in His presence and with His people eternally in an environment without sin. Why would a person who

rejects the true God and His holiness want to be in such a place? Would they be in a state of joy in such a place?

18. Building on this, of course we understand that God is sovereign over everything. We also understand that He has given humans the will to reject Him. Those who end up in hell have only _____ to blame. The Christian philosopher/author C.S. Lewis put it this way, "*Sin is man saying to God throughout his life, 'Go away and leave me alone': Hell is God finally saying to man, 'You may have your wish.' It is God leaving man to himself, as man has chosen.*"

19. God has clearly _____ people about His wrath, judgment, and the reality of hell. This has been done by the prophets, apostles, and faithful Christians throughout history. Jesus made this a continual theme of His preaching and teaching and Himself defeated sin, death, and hell.

Closing Prayer