

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

**Session 3: False Views of What Happens After We Die**

In preparation for this session, read pages 18-20 in *A Simple Explanation of Heaven and Hell*

As a general rule, to distinguish the true from the false it is better to first study the “genuine article” before studying the “counterfeit.” If we know and recognize what God teaches us in the Bible we then have better discernment in identifying a false belief system when it comes along. So far we have learned of God’s plan for eternal life. Sin entered the world, but God provided a means and way for sin to be forgiven and death defeated. We also understand that the Bible teaches our access to heaven depends on what Jesus has done for us and us receiving that gift. When one ends up in hell it is because they have rejected faith in, and thus forgiveness, through Jesus.

Of course not everyone believes what the Bible tells us. As a result there are numerous false ideas about what happens when someone physically dies or what the “afterlife” is like. In this session we see how the secular humanist/naturalist worldview, others religion’s views on eternity, and the concept of purgatory do not align with God has spoken to us through His Word.

Attempting to remove God from the picture

As we have learned, the norm throughout history is that people have believed that there is some type of god/gods and that there is an eternity beyond what we experience on earth. However, there have been throughout history those that rejected a belief in the supernatural. This view has become more common in our modern age, especially in many areas of the Western World.

When someone makes a statement such as, “*When you’re dead, you’re dead*” they are looking at life through a purely naturalistic worldview. Such a world is one where there is no God, no creative work by God, no universal law-giver. Things simply happen by chance, time, scientific laws, survival of the fittest. We are only highly-evolved animals who have physical life for a time and then that will end and then there is nothing. Death is “natural” and something that happens and is unavoidable.

1. Followed to its logical extreme, this view leads to \_\_\_\_\_, the rejection of all religious belief and a belief that life is meaningless.
  
2. Based on everything we have learned so far, I don’t think it is necessary to even look up any Bible verses to refute this. We know what is described above is completely at odds with what Biblical Christianity teaches. Give some examples of how this is so. Is there any hope in the naturalistic view? Is it depressing? What would be some of the results of this view gaining traction?

### Popular Notions of Heaven

Numerous surveys have been relating to how many Americans believe in heaven. A vast majority do (upwards of 80% in some surveys). And of course, most people think they should go there. But many of the views that you encounter regarding heaven are not rooted in Scripture. Some people want to go to heaven, because it “beats the alternative.” Many view heaven as essentially a place where they get to do what they like doing all of the time. As an added bonus they get to be with their loved ones, family, and friends.

3. What are three main problems with these popular notions of heaven (perhaps you can even think of more)?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

### Other view of the “afterlife” rooted in religion/spirituality

*Views from the East/Pagan Religions (that have become common in the West)*

Surveys consistently show that about 25% of Americans believe in reincarnation. The idea is that after you physically die, your soul lives on. It is “reincarnated” in the physical body of another person or animal. The cycle continues until you reach the goal. This belief is rooted heavily in the religions of Hinduism (where the goal is to become one with “god”) and Buddhism (where the goal is to cease to exist).

4. Read Hebrews 9:27. This verse makes it clear (along with many others and the overall theological principles of the Bible) that reincarnation is not \_\_\_\_\_ with Christianity.

5. Why do you think that the idea of reincarnation would be appealing to people?

Another popular idea today is the focus on everything in the universe, especially living things being connected. This is often reflected in what is called the “New Age” philosophy. Roots of this type of thinking come from Eastern Religions (especially Taoism and Shintoism). Some would be led to believe that when our body dies, our spirit is then connected somehow to a natural element of the world (animals, trees, rain, mountains, rivers, etc).

*View of Eternity in other religions (other than the ones already mentioned above):*

Judaism: Just as in Jesus’ day (the Sadducees and Pharisees) Jewish religion today is not monolithic in its view of the “afterlife”. Some believe in a literal place of dwelling while others view it as a spiritual state.

Islam: Like Christianity, Islam teaches a definite eternal dwelling place for the righteous, paradise (heaven) and for the wicked, the fire (hell). They do focus more on the physical pleasures of heaven, and of course the Islamic view of one reaches heaven is heavily works-based.

Latter-Day Saints (Mormons): Although they claim to be Christians, LDS theology is outside of Christian orthodoxy for several reasons. They actually teach that there are three heavens (the highest being the celestial kingdom-which also focuses much on the physical aspect). Which heaven you end up in depends on how good of Mormon that you have been. The “outer darkness” is the closest thing to hell, but very few people end up there according to their teaching.

Jehovah’s Witnesses: Like the LDS, this group on the surface appears Christian-but is not. They essentially believe in two levels for the true followers of Jehovah: a select group of 144,000 get to inhabit heaven and the other “good” people get to reside on a new earth. They deny the existence of hell as a place of eternal punishment, but rather teach that the wicked are simply “annihilated”.

#### The Roman Catholic Doctrine of Purgatory

Among the three branches of Christianity, the doctrine of purgatory is unique to the Roman Catholic Church. The Eastern Orthodox do not teach it. All of the Protestant Reformers would reject a belief in purgatory.

6. What is the idea of purgatory anyway? It comes from the Latin word purgatorious meaning “purifying” or “cleansing”. This Latin word is the root of our English word \_\_\_\_\_.

In Roman Catholic doctrine, purgatory is a place between heaven and hell-a “half-way house” if you will. It is not a nice place, it is a place of punishment. In it people who die with unconfessed and absolved sin of a more “minor” or “venial” nature must be “purified” before they can enter heaven. How long you are there could vary depending on how much sin you have to deal with: perhaps even hundreds or thousands years!

But all is not lost, as purgatory is bad-but it is not hell, it is not eternal. At some point those there will be purified and then be allowed to enter into heaven. Additionally, those on earth can perform works and offer prayers that can lessen a souls time in purgatory.

*Where would they get this doctrine from?* The history is complex, but our booklet gives a brief overview. In the early church, there were Christians who caved under persecution and denied Jesus including by offering sacrifices to the Roman Emperor. Some of those that did would later repent and be received back into the Church. A Biblical model of this is seen in that Peter denied Jesus three times, but after the resurrection Jesus forgives and restores Peter. Those that denied the faith were expected to “prove” themselves to their brothers and sisters that they truly were committed to Jesus. This was to reconcile them to their neighbor, not to earn

forgiveness from God. However, confusion about this entered in over time the concept that some sins had to be “worked off” after death took root. By the 13th Century we see official Roman Catholic doctrine beginning to reflect purgatory and it was reaffirmed at the Council of Trent in the 16th Century.

The Roman Catholic Church does not operate on the principle of *Sola Scriptura*, but they do point to some passages where they defend this doctrine. The key one is from the Apocrypha (which we do not accept as on the same level as Holy Scripture) in 2 Maccabees 12:43-46, specifically verse 46, “*It is therefore a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from sins.*” They will also point to numerous passages that speak of one being purified from sins.

7. Read Malachi 3:3 and 1 Corinthians 3:15. How could these verses be used to defend purgatory? What are they really talking about (see Malachi 3:2 for further context)? When/where does purification take place? Also remember Hebrews 9:27.

Note: The examples cited by Rome to justify the doctrine of purgatory are thin. If there really was a “third destination” after death other than heaven or hell, one would think that the Bible would clearly tell us about it. Neither in the teachings of Jesus nor the Apostles do we see them telling us about purgatory.

*But do Roman Catholics still even teach and believe in purgatory? Haven't they gotten away from that?* The emphasis on purgatory varies from location to location and priest to priest. Some Roman Catholics may hear about it regularly, some not much at all. Some view it as a more literal location and others as a transient spiritual state. But it is clearly still an official Roman Dogma. The most recent Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church in points numbers 1030-1032 affirms the doctrine of purgatory and encourages prayers for the dead. 1030: *All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.*

8. With all of this being examined, why would many continue to believe in purgatory? Why would the idea be attractive to many people? How could this doctrine be beneficial to Rome?

9. What is the main problem of the doctrine of purgatory? How does it obscure the central message of the cross and empty tomb? How does it cloud the main message of Christianity?

Closing Prayer