

Does Heaven Exist, and does God send People to Hell?

Marie Little was an extraordinary woman who was on fire for the Lord, serving as a young missionary in China at the start of the Communist revolution. Then later, serving on an exciting campus ministry called InterVarsity, eventually marrying one of its dynamic leaders, Paul Little. And then, at the age of 70-plus, joining a youthful, rock-and-roll-oriented church, because she said she wanted to be where the Jesus-action was, where people were coming to a living faith in Jesus. Because she believed in Heaven. As John 5:13 says: *“I have written this to you who believe in the Son of God, so that you may KNOW you have eternal life”*. And Marie was 100% sure that Heaven exists, and that therefore Eternal Life also exists – and that one day she would be there with Jesus and all the Saints. And for the last few years of her life she couldn’t stop talking about it, because she could hardly wait to finally experience it. And at her funeral, for her family and friends, while they were sad that she had ‘gone’, it was more a time of celebration that she was now with Jesus than of grieving that she had left them.

But what made them all so confident? How can anyone know what the afterlife will be like – assuming there actually is one?

There is a lot of curiosity in our culture now as to whether there really is a Heaven, and especially whether our all-loving God really sends people to hell. Even assuming that there are actually real places called Heaven and Hell, and that real people go there.

And some interesting approaches have been taken to try to answer this question.

In previous centuries, apparently, experiments were done weighing people just before and just after death to determine the weight of the soul. It was assumed that there would be an immediate reduction in weight, albeit minute. Needless to say, the results were inconclusive because, in Christian theology, the soul is not a material but a spiritual entity, which would of course not register on even the most sensitive of scales!

And therein lies the problem. We’re talking about an immaterial component of the human being – a spirit that can’t be seen, measured or weighed – which at death is transported to an invisible place of which there are no photographs, no YouTube videos, no testimonials from current occupants, or any hard evidence that can be checked out in any remotely scientific manner. So it’s not surprising that many people question the soul’s existence, and of course that of Heaven and hell, a very difficult question to answer.

Christian philosopher Dallas Willard tells of a woman who refused to talk about life after death with her kids because, she said, she didn’t want them to be disappointed if it turns out that there is no afterlife. Willard pointed out that if there is no afterlife her kids won’t have any consciousness with which to feel disappointment. On the other hand, if there IS an afterlife, then her children and any others who enter the next life unprepared may well experience far more than mere disappointment.

So on the chance that we really do face an eternal destiny based upon the choices we make on this earth, I would say it’s definitely worth talking about – and going beyond mere talk to give folk some kind of reasonable assurance.

MAKING THE CASE

But before we try to help someone else get an answer to this question, it might help for us to get more personal – why do you or I believe in heaven, and for that matter, hell? Put another way, what is our own compelling reason to believe that there is an afterlife – one that will last for ETERNITY?

You may reply, “I don’t know; I’ve always accepted it.” But we weren’t BORN with this conviction, we must have picked it up along the way. We probably heard it from our parents, or a Sunday school teacher or a friend, and it just “rang true” so we never investigated further.

But let’s now turn this around. Suppose someone says to us: “I don’t believe in the afterlife”. So we ask, “Why not?” and their response is, “I don’t know, I’ve just never believed it”.

How would you deal with this? Someone who just doesn’t believe really important stuff, without bothering to properly investigate the matter? Unfortunately, if we haven’t properly prepared ourselves, that’s how we can sound to these ‘unbelievers’. So let’s explore some reasons for our belief in the afterlife that go beyond the fact that it simply “rings true”.

Eternity in our hearts

We might point to the fact that virtually every culture and era has had such a belief. Perhaps this is what the Bible means when it says that God “has planted eternity in the human heart” (Eccles. 3:11).

Though this is not in itself grounds for certainty – especially since the details believed vary considerably from culture to culture – it does seem to point to a divinely infused awareness of realities beyond the everyday here and now.

There is something strange about us humans. Though we are earthly beings with limited perspectives, yet we nonetheless have a sense of having been made for more: many of our longings in this life, some conscious and some we’re barely aware of, cannot be fulfilled in the here and now. We have a sense that there has to be something more...

Could this be an echo of “eternity in the human heart” – and evidence that eternity is our true destiny?

Near-death experiences

Or perhaps we can argue that people who have had near-death experiences often see a bright light, meet angels, have visions of Jesus, or experience some other manifestations of life beyond death. Aren’t these grounds for belief? Unlike the soul-weight experiments, these eyewitness accounts seem to be evidence of the afterlife, in spite of the differences in the experiences described. Christian scholars J.P. Moreland and Gary Habermas argue that “from the kind of scientific and psychological testing that has been done, we see that we can place greater confidence in the evidential value of near death experiences...”

Todd & Colton Burpo: “Heaven is for Real” – & Colton met his sister stillborn before his birth.

Ultimate Justice

We all have a sense that if God is indeed loving and all powerful, why is there so much evil in the world? Is this sense of ultimate justice an indicator that we weren’t created for this fallen world with crime and suffering but for a perfect world? But then, if God is indeed all powerful, why doesn’t He DO something and deal with all those who do wrong?

Well, according to the teachings of Jesus and the Bible, God WILL do something in the end at the Judgement. He will mete out justice in an ultimately fair and just way – in ways that finally balance the “fairness scales”. The ones we feel are so unbalanced in this life. Again, this isn’t proof in

and of itself, but it does provide an additional indicator that God has given us an internal sense of justice that points to realities beyond our current experience.

Home beyond the horizon

C.S. Lewis, an ex-atheist who became a master proponent of Jesus and the Christian faith, once observed: “If you really are a product of a materialistic universe, how is it that you don’t feel at home here?... Though I do not believe that my desire for Paradise PROVES that I shall enjoy it, I think it is a pretty good indication that such a thing exists and that some men will... If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”

Interestingly, the apostle Peter referred to God’s people as “temporary residents and foreigners” in this world (1 Pet 2: 11). And in the book of Hebrews, chapter 11 verses 13 to 14, and 16, the writer suggests that Christians martyred for their faith felt they were foreigners here on earth, looking forward to a heavenly homeland they can call their own. The Bible consistently tells us what our Spirit-filled hearts also confirm, that the earth is our temporary dwelling place, that our ultimate home is beyond this world.

Many younger folk, of course, are very often much enamoured of this world and don’t give too much thought to this matter. Certainly I didn’t! Until that Holy Spirit weekend on an Alpha Course on 10th May, 1997, when I woke up and smelled the coffee. The worldly “stuff” had begun to pall, and I felt that there had to be more to life. And that day I found it – a living, growing relationship with Jesus as I daily surrender my life to Him. Now I KNOW Heaven exists, and I can’t wait to get there – not because I am suddenly good and holy, but because I am now covered by the precious, sacrificial blood of Jesus which washes away all wrong doing, past present and future – provided I keep my eyes on Him and keep walking with Him, day by day.

Eternal perspective with earthly benefits

In his best-selling book “Life after Death: The Evidence”, Dinesh D-Souza argues that having a belief in the afterlife can actually improve the quality of THIS life. And people who have done extensive research have found that people with “religious faith” – they don’t specify which faith! – live healthier lives less prone to stress and depression, less likely to attempt suicide, less vulnerable to illness, and more likely to live longer, etc.

GOD AS OUR WITNESS

We have considered some of the broader arguments that might be made for the reality of life after death, but now we have saved what I believe are the surest and most powerful for last. For all the reasons we might believe in life after death – and specifically that there IS a heaven and a hell – the most compelling argument is Jesus’ direct and clear teaching on the topic. And in all of history, no-one else has the credibility that He has to be able to tell us the truth about these realities.

Jesus’ unique credentials

Jesus alone fulfilled multiple Old Testament prophecies, over 300 of them – where and how He would be born, his lineage, how He would live and minister... the list goes on. Add to this the many miraculous healings He performed, and even the people He raised from the dead – his dear friend Lazarus being but one – and it is clear that He was someone special!

He alone lived a sinless life, and surely the tour de force that established His credibility was His rising from the dead three days after His death on the cross. And more than that, He alone has the credibility to be able to tell us the reality of life beyond the grave. He has literally “been there, done that”. So if he says there is a heaven and a hell, and how beautiful the former is and how horrific the latter is, I’m personally happy to take His word for it.

But someone might protest that while we Christians might believe the Bible and Jesus’ teachings on this subject, he does not – he doesn’t accept the Bible, so we have no argument at all!

Here there’s a key distinction we need to make, namely that our case for believing the Bible is not necessarily that it is “the Word of God”. While we believe this anyway, all we need to do is prove that the Bible is *reasonably reliable history*. We don’t need to believe that the Bible is divinely inspired to make the case that the Gospels are solid sources of historic information about what Jesus said and did, and what Israel did in the Old Testament. From His teachings and how He backed them up with supernatural confirmations we quickly come to understand that the historical record presents Jesus as the unique Son of God, the key confirmation to my mind being His resurrection from the death on the third day, which He clearly predicted to His disciples several times, and which predictions are recorded in all the Gospels.

And Jesus’ resurrection is recorded in many secular historians’ accounts, among them being Josephus and Tacitus, one a Jew and the other a Roman, neither of whom had an axe to grind on the subject, merely recording the facts as they had researched them.

Jesus’ clear teaching

Here is a brief sample of some of Jesus’ teachings on the subject of heaven and hell:

- John 14: 2-3: Where He says He will prepare a room in His Father’s House for us.
- Matt. 22: 29-32: Speaking to the Pharisees after they’d told Him the story of the woman who was married to seven brothers, all of whom died, when they asked whose wife she’d be in the afterlife. And He said there is no marriage there, they will be like the angels in heaven.
- Matt. 5: 29-30: Speaking about gouging out an eye or cutting off a hand that causes you to sin, and throwing them away, so your whole body won’t be thrown into hell (this is not a literal instruction but a call for heart-felt repentance).
- Matt. 25: 31-34,41,46: When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and separates the people as a shepherd does his sheep and goats, and then says to the sheep on His right, “Come... inherent the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world”...but says to the goats on His left, “Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons”... And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life.
- Luke 16: 19-31: About the rich man and the poor beggar Lazarus at the gate of the rich man’s home, and how when they both in due course died, the rich man went to hell, while Lazarus went to heaven where he appeared with Abraham. Ironically the rich man asked Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers of the hell that awaited them if they carried on in their current lifestyle. But Abraham said that if they wouldn’t listen to Moses and the prophets – i.e. believe the Bible – that they wouldn’t listen even if someone rose from the dead – Jesus!
- Bill Wiese – “23 Minutes in Hell”. A modern testimony. The greatest emotion Bill sensed there was regret – not his regret but the regret of the deceased spirits. Regret that they had not accepted Jesus’ loving offer of total forgiveness for all their sins while they were still alive.
- Ian McCormack – “A Glimpse of Eternity”

So our main argument for the reality of heaven and hell is based on Jesus' teachings. As the Son of God He was in a unique position to know what He was talking about. He gave us every reason to believe His teachings on the subject. And these out-of-body experiences confirm Jesus' teachings.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE AFTERLIFE

In spite of Jesus' clear teachings on the subject, there is still much speculation amongst "unbelievers".

Lets look at a few of the questions that are likely to come up.

A vacant hell?

Some people struggle with the thought that if God is ultimately loving, how can He possibly send people, who He loves so deeply, to hell? And so they assume that if there is a Heaven, we will all go there. We're good people after all! Aren't we?

But this doesn't fit the facts. For one thing, why would Jesus warn us of God's judgement if there was no such thing? And Jesus clearly teaches that sadly LOTS OF PEOPLE end up there:

Matt. 7: 13-14: "You can enter God's kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it."

Basically, if you haven't consciously accepted the Lord Jesus as your Lord and Saviour, you will be on the wide road, as I was for 52 years of my life. You have to consciously decide to be on the narrow road headed for the narrow gate, otherwise by default you will be on the wide road headed for eternal hell. Because the lack of a conscious YES decision to Jesus is effectively a NO decision. As C.S. Lewis so succinctly put it, either we surrender our lives to Jesus and say, "Thy will be done", or we keep going on our own merry way, in which case God will say to us, "Thy will be done"; even though it breaks His heart to have to do so.

God doesn't owe us anything, far less a second chance, but He so loves us and wants us to be with Him for eternity that He is just waiting for us to turn to Him, even if it is late in life or even at the last minute – remember the one criminal on the one cross next to Jesus: "Remember me when you come into Your Kingdom" he said to Jesus. And Jesus replied: "Truly, today you will be with Me in Paradise". (Luke 23: 40-43) It is never too late!

But if God is love...

...how can He send "good" people to hell?

The short answer is He doesn't! We do, through our choices, or lack of them, as just discussed. But by not accepting Jesus as our Lord and Saviour we are effectively choosing hell as our final destination! Because without a covering of the blood of Jesus, freely offered to all for the forgiveness of our sins, every man, woman and child ever born on this fallen world is headed for hell.

People who haven't heard

But folk can say, "It's OK for those of us who live in a Christian society, but what about those who have never heard of Jesus?" A great question! Here are five quick thoughts to help us respond:

First, the concept that the Bible isn't being taught around the world because the "Christian" West is failing to reach out to the unreached peoples of the world. But a recent missions report has this startling statistic:

One of every eight people on the planet is a practicing Christian, active in their faith!

The number of believers in what used to be the mission fields now surpasses the number of believers in the countries from which the missionaries were sent! In fact more missionaries are sent from non-western churches than from the traditional mission-sending churches in the West. Some facts:

- The Protestant growth rate in South America is well over THREE TIMES the biological birth rate.
- Protestants in China grew from about one million to well over 80 million believers in less than 50 years, with most of that growth in the last few decades.
- In the 1980s, Nepal was still a staunch Hindu kingdom, with only a small persecuted church. Today there are hundreds of thousands of believers, and churches have been started within each of its more than 100 distinct people groups.

So many that we thought we would never reach are now mobilizing to come and evangelise us in the increasingly secular West!

Second, Jesus addressed this when He made the promise: “Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find...and to him who knocks, the door WILL be opened.” (Matt. 7: 7-8) Notice there is no time frame nor is this promise limited to certain people groups. Anyone, anywhere, who is genuinely seeking WILL find that open door. The many Muslims who are coming to a living relationship with Jesus as a result of meeting Him in dreams and visions confirm the ongoing validity of this His promise. There is an excellent DVD entitled “More Than Dreams” which tells four different stories of devout Muslims who have come to a living faith in Christ through dreams and visions while searching for the true God - one of them while actually in Mecca on his Hajj!

Third, it’s helpful to point out that while not everyone has the same amount of information, God is faithful and will honour the commitment of all genuine seekers after truth, irrespective of their current religious affiliation.

Fourth, another point which flows from the previous one, is that God is the ultimately fair judge. He will judge those who reject Him based on the amount of information they had, and what they actually did with it. He or she who had very little information and decided to reject it will be judged more lightly than those who had more.

How do we know this? Jesus said, “When someone has been given much, much will be required in return; and when someone has been entrusted with much, even more will be required of him.” (Luke 12:48) In addition, Jesus told people that there would be greater judgement for those who had heard of Him but had rejected Him, than for those who had not heard of Him and so had not, of course, responded to His call.

And Finally, without exception, the people who are likely to ask us these questions HAVE heard Jesus’ message, and so are without excuse if they have rejected it, or not acted positively upon it.

So... who goes to Heaven?

For many people, Heaven is where everybody goes when they die. An article in the Los Angeles Times reported that “...the majority of Americans believe in life after death and that Heaven and hell exist. What’s more, nearly two thirds think they are Heaven-bound. On the other hand, only one half of 1% said they were hell-bound, according to a national poll by Oxnard-based Barna Research Group.

But when you ask why, confusion reigns. Nine out of ten think they’ll get there because of their good works, moral behaviour or religious performance. This, in spite of the Bible’s clear teaching that we cannot ‘earn’ Heaven, nor will we automatically go there; it is a gift from our Loving

Father God when we accept His Son Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. Ephesians 2: 8-9, one of my favourite passages, sums it up thus:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast. (NIV)

IN CONCLUSION:

Our question was, and still is: “Why should I think that Heaven really exists – and that God sends “good” people to hell?”

- The story I started with, about Marie Little’s memorial service illustrates the confidence we Christians have in the afterlife. The certainty that Marie was in Heaven turned the memorial service into a time of celebration, not mourning. As Believers we need to be ready to share our confident belief with those questioning our Faith.
- There is a nearly universal belief in the afterlife, and God created us with that belief hard wired into our psyches. We also share a sense of ultimate justice, and the stories of people’s near-death experiences support the reality of life after death. Colton Burpo’s and Ian McCormack’s experiences are confirmation of this.
- Jesus had the experience, credentials and knowledge required to be able to tell us with authority about the afterlife. He made it clear that Heaven is a place of joy, while hell is one of punishment and regret. Bill Wiese’s book, “23 Minutes in Hell” is such a testimony.
- Many people have a problem with a God of love sending “good” people to hell. But He doesn’t. They choose to go there by clinging to their sinful lifestyles, resisting God’s Grace, and refusing to turn from their current lifestyles to receive Jesus’ sacrifice on their behalf. So God honours the free will He gave us all, and says to them: “Thy will be done.” *Even though it breaks His Heart.*
- God’s offer of Heaven is open to everyone. He is patiently waiting for everyone to turn around and come to Him. However, He won’t *force* anyone to believe and turn to Jesus to be spiritually born again, because He gave us free will – **it is a choice that we all must make.**

But please remember:

No decision – ie not making a conscious “Yes” decision – is a “No” decision

- Many question how a Loving God can condemn people who haven’t heard the Good News and therefore haven’t had the chance to respond. However we can be certain that, because of God’s love and grace, no-one is left without the opportunity to choose. God works in many ways to draw people to Him – for example, Muslims coming to faith having seen Jesus in visions and dreams. People will be held accountable for the decision they made with the amount of information they did have.

AMEN

A summary of Chapter 9 of the book “The Questions Christians Hope No-one Will Ask” by Mark Mittelberg – Tony Hoare, 23rd July, 2019.