

October 11, 2015

TEXT: Matthew 25:31–33, 41–46

TITLE: Re-Confirmation Class – Lesson #5: Heaven & Hell

Once a long time ago, two people walked along talking about faith, life and death. At some point, person #1 asked, “Tell me what you think about heaven & hell. You’ve read a lot and studied world religions. What are your thoughts about life after death?” After a pause, person #2 said, “That’s a big topic. Much of what people believe about heaven and hell is nowhere to be found in the bible. Popular piety has been trusted a lot more than sound doctrine. So let’s back up a bit and think about life after death in general. During everyone’s time here on earth they will experience blessings and troubles, joys and sorrows. A blessed life is one that is faithful, contented, and leaves the world a little better. A cursed life is one that is unfaithful, painful, and adds nothing of value to the world. In most ancient religions, everyone who dies simply goes to the place of the dead—Sheol, Hades. It’s not necessarily good or bad; it’s simply where dead people end up. Sort of like Cleveland. (Sorry, I couldn’t resist.)

“Even as people thought about the world as including a place for the living plus a generic place for the dead, they also recognized that some places on earth were holy places while others were evil places. Some places were associated with worshipping God and sacredness, like Mount Sinai. Other places were associated with acts of evil, wailing and gnashing of teeth. An example of this was the Valley of Hinnon, a horrible place outside the city of Jerusalem where people used to sacrifice their children to idols. Eventually, over the centuries, people changed their ideas about the place for the dead as actually being a place where people were punished after death. Since they needed to call this place something, they thought of an evil place like Hinnon and turned that into a new name, Gehenna, which we translate into English as Hell. And since those child sacrifices involved being burnt in fire, Gehenna or Hell became a place of fire. Along the way, some argued that God would never put someone in fire forever, so the old rabbis taught their congregations that this horrible punishment could last no longer than one year. But later Jewish believers were influenced by other Middle Eastern religions which taught that after death we are either assigned to eternal life in heaven or eternal banishment in hell. So over time Hinnon became Gehenna which became a place of hellfire and later for never-ending punishment for souls damned by God. Pretty grim, huh?”

“Yes it is” agreed person #1. “Things moved from worshipping a Creator God who blesses us and calls us to live lives obeying God’s law and showing God’s love to teaching about a God who is a judge sending people either to a place of blessing or a place of eternal damnation.” Person #2 continued: “Precisely. At some point the focus shifted from God to geography, from a holiness that holds us in life and death to a fixation over subterranean fires of damnation.”

At that point, a third person came up and joined the other two. He was a stranger to them, yet his demeanor invited their trust and welcome. He asked, "What was it you were discussing on the road just now?" To which one of the others replied, "We were talking about heaven and hell." "Hmm," answered the stranger. "Why should you care about those things?" Person #1 pushed back on this and said, "Well, I for one want to know where I'm going after I die." The stranger looked skeptical. "Really. And you're important enough that the universe should tell you in advance where you're going after death?" Person #1 stammered, "It's not that. It's just that I want to understand what's expected of me and how it's decided about who goes to heaven and who goes to hell." The stranger quietly said, "Seems to me it would be better to focus on how you're living each day now instead of fixating on whether you've played the game correctly so as to get a winning ticket at the end of life."

Person #2 broke in. "I think it's important to know that after life all the wrongs in the world will be made right. I want to know that evil people are punished, that they'll get what they deserve." The stranger shifted his attention. "I'm not aware of anyone who lived a holy life simply because they were taught to be afraid of hell.¹ People do as they choose; hell is at best an idle threat when someone truly wants to do something bad. More importantly, wishing so hard for someone else to end up in hell can't be healthy for the state of your own soul. Wanting someone else to be tormented in the future can't do much good for your own faith. Seems to me that's the wrong way to think about things."

Person #1 spoke up again. "Look, we just want things to make sense. This life doesn't always work out fairly. Good people suffer; bad people get away with murder. If justice isn't guaranteed during our lifetime, then I sure hope things get straightened out in the life to come." The stranger softened his tone. "You're right. In our short lives, not everything works out as it ought. Death comes and there's invariably a lot of unfinished business left over at the end. We want there to be justice—for there to be fairness and a tidying up of all loose ends. I guess I'm suggesting that the work of sorting it all out is God's work, not ours. Either we trust God to do this or we don't. And if we hand it over to God, why are we still so fixated on whether someone else is going to heaven or hell?"

"You seem to know a lot about all this," challenged Person #2. "Why do you think the bible talks about heaven and hell?" The stranger paused: "Let me tell you a parable. There was once a city in which no more children were born.² For years no one welcomed a baby into the world or watched a toddler learn to walk. The people of that city lost all hope. Why study or research cures for disease? Why create museums or write books or do art? Without children, there was no future. They knew that one day all humanity would be gone; all would be forgotten; all was for naught. Their society began to fall apart. Until one day a child was born. Suddenly the people had a purpose again. They recovered their core humanity. They rediscovered hope."

“I believe that during this life, we are called to be in relationship with God and one another. We exist to care for God’s world and God’s people. It is important work. At some point in faith history, hell entered the language of faith to warn people that decisions do matter; that they should choose wisely. But just like Gehenna of old, hell was always meant to be more symbolic than literal, because no one ultimately does good well out of fear.”

“At some point in faith history, heaven entered the language of faith to reassure people that decisions do matter and that they are not alone. Their core identity is communal, interconnected. And this has a long trajectory, beyond the horizon of this life. Heaven is how we remember that life is fundamentally hopeful, that children are being born and will continue to be born; therefore, we should study and research, create museums, write book, make art. In God and with God all things will be resolved and yes, justice will prevail.”

“Heaven is our way of saying that where we are now and for always is with God and with one another. By praising and serving the triune God there will be ever new surprises and joys as God’s loving gift of life goes on unfolding eternally and boundlessly.³ Hell is one way of saying that for now and for always, some may deeply desire to be apart from others, disregarding both humankind and God. Hell is the terrible weariness and incredible boredom of a life focused entirely on itself. It has little to do with punishment or appeasing a vindictive deity. It is simply about a sinful, self-destructive resistance to the eternal love of God.”⁴

“Now, at the end of our lives, can our “No” to God be stronger than God’s “Yes” to us? I don’t know. I’d like to think God’s “Yes” wins. Yet for right now, we have this moment. We have this day and one another and a God whose kingdom is literally in our midst. We are told to trust, hope and pray to our loving God for a future redemption of the world far greater than all we are inclined to desire or even able to imagine, one that will be true in this life and for the life to come.”⁵

As the two persons approached their home town, the stranger appeared to be going further. They asked him to stay with them. And when he was at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. That day they’d heard what they needed and been well fed. And so it happened, once a long time ago. AMEN.

¹ Cf. Marilynne Robinson, Lila, 2014, p. 101.

² Cf. P.D. James, Children of Eden.

³ Daniel Migliore, Faith Seeking Understanding, p. 246.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 247; quoting Karl Barth, The Humanity of God.