



into the Melting Pot

the question is more important than the answer

Sunday 15 November

Heaven & Hell

Is there really 'Eternal Life'?

God Loves Us. Here's how the traditional story goes . . . God offers us everlasting life by grace, freely, through no merit on our part. Unless we do not respond in the right way. Then he will torture you forever. In Hell. **What?**

Rob Bell – *Love Wins* (2011)

Structure for the session

- What is Eternal Life? – personal responses
- Development of the ideas of the universe and life after death
- What the Bible says about
 - Heaven
 - Hell
- So what? – where are we, what matters, and how does it impact our message and the way we live?

What is Eternal Life?

- Is this forever, time unending, or more to do with transcending time?
- We see 'life' and 'death' as fixed states – in OT times these are more a description of the way of being alive (choose life over death – Deuteronomy 30:15).
- Jesus was also given similar words with 'Let the dead bury their own dead' in Luke 9:60 (Matthew 8:22).
- 'The age to come' – a state of being, rather than meaning an afterlife.
- Alternatively, is it a fictional hope that our lives are not transient?

The Universe

Within the Bible, we have a three tier universe – the earth, the heavens above (perceived as a dome across which the sun moved, and through which it rained), and the waters below.

God lived above the heavens in Heaven with his angelic host.

Life After Death

- Egyptian culture had an extensive belief system that involved huge efforts in preparing the Pharaohs for their life in the afterworld (Pyramid tombs).
- This was not emulated by the Hebrew people; however, there is the story of Elijah being 'taken up to heaven in a whirlwind' (2 Kings 2:11), and possibly Enoch also (Genesis 5:24).
- An understanding of 'resurrection' came into Jewish thinking, and took hold around 150BCE with the Pharisee sect embracing this (who would have been thrilled with Matthew 27:52,53).
- This all gets tied in to Judgement . . .

Heaven

A place of perfection.

It became synonymous with 'God', and Matthew in particular uses 'Kingdom of Heaven' instead of 'Kingdom of God' to avoid using God's name.

Some notions of layers to heaven with Paradise (Luke 23:43) and the 'third heaven' (2 Corinthians 12:2).

Hell

- Sheol (a Hebrew word) – where you go when you die (the grave, pit or depths) – Psalms 6, 16, 18, 30, 103.
- Hades (Greek for Sheol) - Matthew 11:23 (Luke 10:15) – brought down to Hades (*NBD: understood metaphorically!*); Acts 2:27,31 (Psalm 16:10) – 'in the world of the dead', 'rot in the grave'; Acts 16:18 – 'the gates of Hades shall not prevail' or 'not even death will be able to overcome it'. Also in Revelation 1, 6 and 20.
- Gehenna – obscure, appears in late rabbinic literature - a place of eternal punishment for sinners, with ideas of annihilation or purgatory. Alternatively, 'the valley of Hinnom' (to the SW of Jerusalem) which was the city dump. Fires burned continuously to remove the rubbish, wild animals scavenged for scraps (wailing, gnashing of teeth; fires of Hell) - see James 3:6
- Tartarus – from Greek mythology: the underworld from where demi-gods judged those in the 'abyss', but in 2 Peter 2:4 for fallen angels.

Jesus and Hell

Words given to Jesus: Matthew 5:26, 10:28 (Luke 12:5), 18:9, (Mark 9:46 quoting Isaiah 66:24), 23:15. Also Matthew 12:32 – never forgiven.

Resurrection

Is this physically coming back to life? What is 'Raised from the dead'?

Paul and The Church

- Having to change tack because Jesus is late! – what happens to those who have died 'in the faith' before the expected return of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15)?
- Limbo – for unbaptised children and noble savages, now consigned to Limbo!
- Purgatory – for purging, so that after a time limited bit of torture to pay for our wrongdoing, everyone gets to go to heaven.

Pie in the Sky and the need for Social Justice

- The Church had Heaven as the place, after you die, where all the wrongs of this world are put right (so you don't have to deal with them now!!)
- As science moved the focus, the notion of afterlife changed.
- A surge in social justice activity over one hundred years ago could be seen as a response to this lack of belief in an afterlife.

What about us?

- Do you 'believe' in eternal life?
- Does it matter?
- How do we 'update' the Christian gospel.

Eternal Life: a new vision, beyond religion, beyond theism, beyond Heaven & Hell

There is no supernatural God who lives above the sky or beyond the universe. There is no parental deity watching over us from whom we can expect help. There is no deity whom we flatter into acting favourably or manipulate by being good. There are no record books and no heavenly judge keeping them to serve as the basis on which human beings will be rewarded or punished. There is no way that life can be made fair or that a divine figure can be blamed for its unfairness. Heaven and Hell are human constructs designed to make fair in some ultimate way the unfairness of life. The idea that in an afterlife the unfairness of this world will be rectified is a pious dream.

Bishop John Selby Spong 2009.