

## **The Hope of Heaven and Hell**

[Show photo – The Thinker] This is the famous statue entitled *The Thinker*, by Rodin. Have you ever wondered what he’s thinking about? Some say he’s trying to remember where he left his clothes. I don’t think that’s it.

This sculpture was originally created to sit on the top of his greatest masterpiece, “The Gates of Hell.” [Show photo – Gates of Hell] “The Gates of Hell” has dozens of beings writhing in agony as they await judgment. The Thinker at the top is contemplating - hell.

Throughout this summer, I, along with our great staff, have been preaching on the topic of hope. We all understand how hopeful heaven is, but how is hell hopeful? That’s where we’re going to start today, considering...

### **I. The Hope of Hell**

So, let’s just be honest – there’s nothing hopeful about hell unless, UNLESS you know you AREN’T going there. In Dante’s epic poem, *The Divine Comedy*, he imagines that the real gates of hell carry these words, “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here!” But if you know you aren’t entering there, you certainly DO have reason to hope. And in what way does hell give hope to those who aren’t going there?

Basically, it releases us from thinking that final justice is our responsibility. We often hear people who have been victimized by some great injustice say that they “will not rest until justice is done.” If there is no hell, then we can understand their feelings. But there IS a hell and it will be the ultimate form of justice for unrepentant sinners. This is what Jesus is telling us in Rev. 20:

**Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. (Rev. 20:11-12)**

If you’re concerned about the private information that the NSA has on you, wait ‘til you see what God has recorded in HIS books! Justice will be done! And God’s punishment will be much more severe than anything man could create. He spells it out for us. Jesus says:

**Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Rev. 20:14-15)**

Some theologians have speculated that either hell doesn’t really exist or that it doesn’t involve eternal punishment. In other words, sinners are punished by ceasing to exist. But that’s not what Jesus said. In Matt. 25, where Jesus talks about how, at the end of history, He will separate the sheep from the goats, He says regarding the goats that:

**...they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.** (Matt. 25:46)

He didn't say that they will be annihilated. He said that they would endure eternal punishment. So, this is why Romans 12 quotes Deut. 32 and tells us:

**Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay;" says the Lord.** (Rom. 12:19)

Justice that is undone in this life will most certainly be accomplished in the next. The existence of hell guarantees that.

But a second way that hell gives us hope is that it reminds us of what's important. Some people have condemned the early Puritans because they spoke of death and hell so much. In fact, in the New England Primer of 1777, the Puritans had school children memorize a poem which included these words:

Tho' I am young yet I may die, and hasten to eternity:

There is a dreadful fiery hell, where wicked ones must always dwell:

There is a heaven full of Joy, where godly ones must always stay:

To one of these my soul must fly, as in a moment when I die:

Why would the Puritans teach this to young children? Because it teaches them that our most precious possession is our eternal soul and the final destination of our soul is one of two places: either heaven or hell. Jesus made it clear that we can KNOW for sure which one of those places will be our home. If your name is in the book of life, you will NOT be thrown into the lake of fire. In fact, Jesus said:

**The second death has no power over them...** (Rev. 20:6)

Without a knowledge of the existence of heaven and hell, we fall into a profound hopelessness about the future. The book, *Parenting Beyond Belief*, is aimed at helping non-religious parents deal with the sticky questions kids ask like, "What happened to Grandpa after he died? Will he be coming home for Christmas?" The authors recommend telling children, "No, honey, Grandpa won't come home for Christmas. He died and is dead for always." <sup>i</sup> Which message do you think is more appropriate for young children – this one or the biblical message of the Puritans? The message of hell's existence is hopeful because it reminds us of what's important.

Secondly, we, of course, must consider...

### **III. The Extravagant Hope of Heaven**

As we think about heaven, I can't help but make a comment about the various books in print today written by people who claim that they have actually been to heaven and returned to tell us about it. These are in a class of books that one reviewer calls "heavenly tourism." At least a couple of these were written by children and one of those child-authors is Alex Malarkey. With a name like that, we should've been skeptical from the beginning, right?

Well, Alex has since grown up and this past January he admitted that he flat out lied about the whole thing. In an open letter to Christian bookstores online, he wrote, "I did not die. I did not go to heaven."

Now, let me say this: I have tremendous respect for Alex Malarkey. In fact, I think he has most certainly redeemed his name. This whole situation derived from a real tragedy in his life when he was six years old, from which he is still paralyzed today. But listen to what the adult Alex has to teach us. He wrote this past January:

"I said I went to heaven because I thought it would get me attention. When I made the claims that I did, I had never read the Bible. People have profited from lies, and continue to. They should read the Bible, which is enough. The Bible is the only source of truth. Anything written by man cannot be infallible." <sup>ii</sup>

Friends, the Bible is the only infallible source of truth. We all have our favorite authors, teachers and preachers, but be careful! If you're substituting any human author for God's Word, eventually you're going to be deceived and off the path. To be safe, I would say that the time you spend reading human authors should be matched by an equal amount of time reading the Bible. Jesus said:

**Sanctify them (make holy) by the truth; your word is truth.** (John 17:17)

The Bible is the only guaranteed source of pure truth.

So, what does the Bible, God's Word, have to say about hope and heaven? This passage from Rev. 21 is one of several passages in which God reveals important truths about the place that Jesus calls *my Father's house*. (John 14:2) I see three truths revealed here that should really fill us with hope.

The first is that it's all new! Aren't new things great? Guys – don't you love that new car smell? Seriously... Or, how about a new tool or a new computer or new golf clubs? (Ladies, have you noticed that these are all inanimate objects? Of course, you noticed! But that's another sermon.) Ladies – how about new friends or a new Facebook connection or a new baby? (Guys, have you noticed that none of these are inanimate objects?) Hey, whatever your passion, isn't "new" awesome? Jesus says that, in heaven, everything's going to be new:

**Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.** (The sea in the Revelation is symbolic of evil, the satanic beast came out of the sea). **I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"** (Rev. 21:1-2, 5)

The whole world is going to have that new-car smell! It's all new! Why should this give us hope? Because if it's all new, that means that the old is all gone. And Jesus says that: (Rev. 21:4)

**He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.**

Can you get your mind around this? This old, pain-producing world won't just be suspended temporarily. It will be gone with no chance of it's ever returning. Ever! Because it's all going to be new. That fills me with hope. How about you?

Secondly, heaven should fill us with hope because heaven will be from God and full of God. (Rev. 21:2-3)

**I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.**

Do you see it? This is going to be a whole new paradigm. It will be unlike anything we've ever experienced before. In fact, it will be what this world was

always intended to be and was for about 48 hours or so, before the serpent entered the garden. C. S. Lewis has said some wonderfully descriptive and biblical things about heaven. For example, it was Lewis who said:

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. <sup>iii</sup>

And using his gift of prose, he explains it this way:

Your soul has a curious shape because it is... a key to unlock one of the doors in the house with many mansions. For it is not humanity in the abstract that is to be saved, but you – you, the individual... Blessed and fortunate creature, your eyes shall behold Him and not another's. All that you are, sins apart, is destined, if you will let God have His good way, to utter satisfaction... Your place in heaven will seem to be made for you and you alone, because you were made for it. <sup>iv</sup>

In heaven you will experience God and His creation and even your own self as you have never experienced any of that before. Like the long-term heroin addict, we have become so accustomed to our sin addiction that we really can't even imagine what life would be like without sin. But that's what heaven will be: pure, clean, technicolor joy, because it is from God and full of God.

Finally, even the thought of heaven should fill us with hope because it will be the final version of reality. "New" is especially good when you have things that "go bad:" they spoil, rot, rust and fall apart. But what if we lived in a reality where there was no decay, nothing ever went bad or fell apart? Well, that's what Jesus is promising to us:

**He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars – their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."** (Rev. 21:6-8)

This isn't saying that there won't be any creativity in heaven or that new things will be banned. It's saying that what is created will never go bad, or turn rotten or introduce any form of moral decay. Heaven will be the final form and God will look at it and us and say, "It is good!" Doesn't that fill you with hope?

It should; unless, of course, you aren't really sure that you're going to end up in heaven. Are you sure of heaven? If your answer is, "Well, I hope so," that's not the definition of "hope" that we're working with here. We're working off a biblical definition of hope that comes from our key verse, Heb. 6:19-20 which says in full:

**We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf.**

Your anchor, your hope, must be in Jesus, not in an idea or a feeling. Have you asked Him to forgive your rebellion, remove your guilt and write your name in the book of life that He spoke of in Rev. 20? Don't mess with this! It's too important!! Heaven is real but so is hell! If you've never done this, no matter your age, do it now. Secure your anchor in Christ. Let's pray...

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<sup>i</sup> Lisa Miller, "BeliefWatch How To," Newsweek (7-16-07)

<sup>ii</sup> Ron Charles, "'Boy Who Came Back From Heaven' actually didn't; books recalled," *Washington Post*, (Jan. 16, 2015)

<sup>iii</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1975), p. 120

<sup>iv</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1962), p. 147-148