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Matthew 25:31-46

What We Believe: Hell

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What happens when you die? In 2005, a group of theologians tried to answer this question. This group, self-titled *Modest Mouse*, wrote down what they believed in an album called *Good News for People Who Love Bad News*. In their hit single “Float On” they sang this...

And we'll all float on OK (x3)
And we'll all float on alright
Already we'll all float on
Now don't you worry we'll all float on alright
Already we'll all float on alright
Don't worry we'll all float on

I understand their message to be this. *No matter what we go through, good or bad, we'll all float on to a better place in the end.* That's a very attractive message, and maybe it's one you believe, but is it true? In 1999, a different group of theologians named *Cake* sang a song with these lyrics:

Sheep go to Heaven,
Goats go to Hell,
Sheep go to Heaven,
Goats go to Hell,

So in this battle of the bands, who is right? *Do we all float on alright in the end, or do the sheep go to heaven and the goats go to hell?* This is the **most important question** you can ever ask. If hell is fake, you're wasting your time here. But if it's real, do you know for sure that you won't end up there? Today I'm going to give you a simple explanation of what happens when you die **according to the Bible**. The best place to start is at the **moment of death** for a Christian and a non-Christian. The Bible teaches...

1. When Christians die, they go to be with Jesus in heaven.

What do I mean by Christians? Do I mean any one who says, “I'm a Christian?” No. Many people call themselves Christians but really aren't, so I've created this definition from our articles of faith and the Bible.

A Christian is anyone who repents of their sin, puts their faith and trust in Jesus Christ alone, and bears fruit as they follow after him—all through the work of the Holy Spirit.

This definition of a Christian is basic. To be a Christian, you have to recognize your own sin, ask Jesus to forgive you, and put your faith and trust in him. You give evidence of that salvation through bearing fruit, like caring for the poor as our passage describes; and this whole process is overseen by the Holy Spirit. This looks different for a child than for an adult. One is more basic than the other; and we're all saved by grace.

But what happens when a Christian dies? For those of you who are visual, I've tried to illustrate a Christian dying and going to be with Jesus in heaven in our **slides**. Paul writes...

We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. **2 Corinthians 5:8**

We are taken by God to be with Jesus in a place called “**paradise**” or “**heaven**.” Later Paul speaks of a man who was actually taken to heaven. Notice Paul calls this place both “paradise” and heaven.”

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven... And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows— was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell.

2 Corinthians 12:2a, 3-4

If you are **driving home** from church today, and you drive your car into a really large **pothole** and **die**, if you know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you’ll be okay. Yes. Your spirit will be apart from your body, but your spirit will be with Jesus in a place that’s more beautiful and wonderful than you can ever **imagine**. The next time you start to feel **afraid** of death, just imagine being with Jesus, because that’s what will happen. But that’s only half the story. *What happens to people who don’t believe in Jesus when they die?*

2. When non-Christians die, they are locked away in Hades.

Were you were expecting me to say non-Christians go to hell? The Greek word for “hell” is “**geenna**” or “**gehenna**” and it’s the place non-Christians go **after the final judgement** (more on that later). Gehenna was a place in “the valley of Hinnom, south of Jerusalem” where people worshipped Molech. They sacrificed animals and people, both enemies and babies (2 Kings 16:3). Because of flies and disease, they kept constant fires burning there.¹ Over the course of time, Gehenna became a metaphor for hell (Jer 7:29-34).²

The Greek word “**hades**” is used in the New Testament to describe where the wicked go when they die, **before the final judgment**. In **Luke 16**, Jesus tells the parable of a beggar named Lazarus who dies and is carried to “Abraham’s side (or bosom).” A rich man also dies, and he is sent to Hades.

In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’ **Luke 16:23-24**

Notice that Hades is a place of punishment, or torment. It’s described as a place of agony and fire. Hades is also a **waiting cell**—“It is conceived as an underground prison with locked gates to which Christ holds the key.”³ Jesus says in two places...

And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. **Matthew 16:18**

I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades. **Revelation 1:18**

There’s a reason **prisons** are called “hellish places.” They’re modeled on the one true prison, hades. When you think of **Jesus**, you may think of a really **lovable hippie** who has dreadlocks and wears an overabundance of **knitwear**. If you’ve ever saw **Godspell**, that’s pretty much who Jesus is. But the Jesus of the Bible is not just a Savior, or a friend; he’s also a **Prison Warden**. Jesus is the one in charge of Hades, and everyone there. He has final **authority**. If you don’t ask him to set you free from sin and death in this life, he

¹ *MGD*, s.v. “γέεννα,” paragraph 3239. [accord://read/Mounce_Greek_Dictionary#3239](http://read/Mounce_Greek_Dictionary#3239)

² Chan, Francis; Sprinkle, Preston. *The Francis Chan Collection: Crazy Love, Forgotten God, Erasing Hell, and Multiply* (Kindle Locations 4194-4213). David C. Cook. Kindle Edition.

³ *MED*, s.v. “HELL,” 332. [accord://read/Mounce_Expository#5469](http://read/Mounce_Expository#5469)

won't do it in the next. If you're not a Christian, a true follower of Jesus, you should be **afraid**. I don't want you to walk out of this church, die, and go to a prison with no escape. *So when Christians die, they go to heaven to be with Jesus, and when non-Christians die, they're locked away in Hades.*

3. In the intermediate state, we await the resurrection.

The **intermediate state** is happening right now for everyone who has ever died. But one day it will end. See, heaven, or paradise, right now, is **not the most perfect place**. And hades is not as bad as it could be. This is because humans are created not only with **spirits** (or souls), but also with **bodies**. All of us are awaiting the **resurrection** to be returned to our bodies. This will happen when the trumpet sounds and Christ returns.

in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. **1 Corinthians 15:52**

This isn't like a fog horn, or a public-announcement siren. Everyone everywhere, whether they are **alive** or **dead**, will hear it. In that moment, Christians and non-Christians will rise from the grave (John 5:28-29).

4. When Christ returns, you will face the final judgment.

When Christ returns, he will no longer be a **prison warden**, but the **supreme court judge**. This final judgment is called the "judgment of Christ" or the "great white throne" judgment (2 Cor 5:10; Rev 20:11). **Different Christians** understand how exactly this will take place differently, so I encourage you to investigate this for yourself in the Bible. But I see one great judgment, which we read about in **Matthew**. Here Jesus separates the **sheep** (Christians) from the **goats** (non-Christians).

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. Matthew 25:31-32

In our Matthew text, Jesus distinguishes between the sheep and goats based on how they have taken care of poor and needy Christians. In one of **Timothy Keller's** sermons on this passage, he points out that in this story both the sheep and the goats are **surprised**. Some are surprised they obeyed and others they disobeyed. This passage is both a **strong reminder** for us to obey Jesus' commands, and a **sweet reminder** that in the end, we will be **surprised by grace**. Even as we strive to obey, in the end salvation, even our good works, are a **gift** from God through the work of the Holy Spirit (Eph 2:10). *So what happens at this judgment?*

First, Jesus will reward true Christians (his sheep) with **eternal life**.

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. Matthew 25:34

Second, Jesus will condemn those who do not know him (the goats) to **eternal punishment**.

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels...' "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." Matthew 25:41, 46

Now if you're a **Christian**, and you **die tonight**, I don't think you'll be standing before Christ at the final judgment wondering whether or not you will be condemned. I believe you'll know where you stand. At some point, we will even join Jesus in judging the angels (1 Cor 6:3). But what if you're **not a true Christian**?

5. If you don't know Christ, you will be condemned to hell.

Revelation 20 depicts the final judgment from a different angle than caring for the poor. **Christians** are judged by their names being written in “**the Lamb’s book of life**” (Rev 13:8; 21:27). This is all of us who have put our faith and trust in **Christ** and **his good deeds** instead of our own. He has paid the penalty for our sins, and we have received his perfect good deeds on our behalf (2 Cor 5:21). We are counted as righteous.

But **non-Christians** are judged by their own good deeds, and because none of them are perfect in thought, word, deed, or lack of deed (Matt 5:48), they (along with **death** and **Hades**) are sentenced to **hell** (gehenna), which is also called “**the lake of fire**.”

The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire. **Revelation 20:13-15**

For the rest of this message, we’re going to focus on hell. Some of my research comes from Francis Chan’s book, *Erasing Hell*, which I read as I prepared. My sermon is not going to answer all of your questions on hell, so please pick up a copy and read it. So what are the **main take-aways** on hell?

A. Hell is more horrible than you can imagine.

Maybe some of you think that hell is not a real place at all, but the **consequences of bad decisions** we make in this life. Like, “I smoked, now I have lung-cancer, man this is hell.” That view is wrong. *Although the Bible uses symbols to describe hell, hell is not just a symbol. It’s a real place.* Francis Chan writes that people like “John Calvin, Martin Luther, C. S. Lewis, Billy Graham, D. A. Carson, J. I. Packer”⁴ and more do not think these images are a literal description of hell. Rather, hell is so bad our very **vocabulary is inadequate** to fully describe what it means to be sentenced, body and soul, to hell.

Jesus himself calls hell a “fiery furnace” and “outer darkness” where there is “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 8:11-12; 13:49-50). Do you know what fire expresses? Immense pain. Blackest darkness? Complete isolation. Weeping and gnashing of teeth? A place you don’t want to be. The New Testament speaks of the final judgment and hell in another horrible way, **God’s wrath** or **condemnation**.

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on them. **John 3:36**

Hell is God’s unchecked wrath poured out on anyone who has rejected the Son, Christ Jesus. Some of you probably had to read **Jonathan Edwards’** most famous sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* in high-school or college. In it he describes God’s wrath, his anger towards our sin

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince; and yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment.

Hell is more horrible than you can imagine, but God extends his grace for now. What are you going to do?

B. Hell is final (punitive), not corrective.

⁴ Chan, Francis; Sprinkle, Preston. *The Francis Chan Collection: Crazy Love, Forgotten God, Erasing Hell, and Multiply* (Kindle Locations 5136-5139). David C. Cook. Kindle Edition.

Hell is intended as a punishment. That's what "punitive" means. Hell deals out a punishment intended to punish, not a punishment intended to correct or restore. In other words, there's no second chances in hell.

Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, **Hebrews 9:27**

Hell is **not purgatory**, meant to refine those who go there to get their hearts ready for heaven. For those of you who come from a **Catholic background**, purgatory comes from church tradition, not the Bible. For those of you who come from a **universalist background**, we do not believe everyone goes to heaven in the end, or that Christ saves everyone so that none go to hell. Hell is the final destination of all who reject Jesus.

C. "Hell is a place of annihilation or never-ending punishment."

This last point about is quoted from Francis Chan, who came to believe this he studied hell. There are three views of hell: 1) **universalism**, no one ends up there; 2) **annihilationism**, the people who go there are destroyed once God's justice is satisfied; and 3) **eternal-conscious torment**, which is just like it sounds. The torment goes on forever and ever. The last position is what the majority of the church has held for all of church history, but the second position is held by the likes of John Stott, Clark Pinnock, and Edward Fudge.

So here's the deal. **I don't know everything**. There are many things I'm still wrestling with and figuring out. What I can tell you is that universalism is wrong; but I've recently been challenged that annihilationism has more Biblical grounds than I first thought. The Bible talks a lot about **destruction** that seems absolute (Matt 10:28, James 4:12). Our Articles of Faith allow for either option, but don't choose based on emotion. What's key when wrestling with difficult topics like this is to keep going back to the Bible to see what God says.

The point of this section is not "how long will hell last" but—*at the final judgement, you will be condemned to hell if you do not know Christ*. The good news is that hell doesn't end the story for Christians.

6. Christians will inhabit the new heaven and new earth with God.

I'm super excited to tell you more about spending eternity with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the new heavens and new earth next week, so please come back.

Pastor Jonathan Romig wrote and preached this message for the people of Cornerstone Congregational Church. [Click here to listen to more sermons](#) or [click here to read our story](#).

Jude 20-21 But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life. (NIV®)