



INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF THE WORD

The Theology of Heaven and Hell

Lesson Seven – Introduction to the Theology of Heaven

LESSON OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION

The belief in the afterlife is the hope of many cultures and religions. It seems to be the primary motivator for living a respectful, good, moral life.

People who do not believe in life after death would fall into category of humanists, agnostics, or atheists. Here is a quick definition of these terms.

A. Definition of Humanist

The public domain dictionary defines humanism as an outlook or system of thought attaching prime importance to human rather than divine or supernatural matters. Humanist beliefs stress the potential value and goodness of human beings, emphasize common human needs, and seek solely rational ways of solving human problems.

Humanists believe that man is the ultimate being. They do not put much credence into the supernatural, miracles, or a Supreme Being who helps them. They buy heavily into theories of evolution. Seeking to be better than the generations before is what drives humanism.

B. Definition of Agnostic

This is a person who believes that nothing is known or can be known of the existence or nature of God or of anything beyond material phenomena. They are only sure of what can be seen, touched, or felt. Agnostics claim neither faith nor disbelief in God.

This is not as much anti-God than it is a belief that the existence of God cannot be proven. Their beliefs are very close to humanism.

C. Definition of Atheist

This is a person who believes that God does not exist.

D. Various Views on Life After Death

There are people who do believe in the existence of God and in life after death. Different religions, including Christianity, have various views about what life after death will be like. More religions than Christianity teach some version of Heaven.

Unless there is something written in the sacred text, it is difficult to formulate a view on something which is unexplored and undefined.

The Christian view of Heaven comes almost entirely from the New Testament.

The Jews were waiting for a kingdom to come and raise up Israel as a world superpower.

The Christian view of Heaven comes almost entirely from the New Testament, whereas the Jewish view of Heaven is vague because very little is written about it in the Old Testament.

The list of passages about Heaven in the Old Testament is very short. In them, one can note that God has a throne. Seraphim and angels introduce one to a supernatural world. Lucifer and Michael (the archangel) are mentioned, which exposes some kind of Heavenly celestial world, but there is nothing about humans being there.

One of the first statements ever made that gave the indication that any humans would go to Heaven was when Jesus said the following:

"In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you."

- John 14:2

The people of the Old Testament were waiting for a kingdom to come. They believed that the Messiah would come and raise up Israel as a world superpower.

Although there are glimpses into the throne room of God by Isaiah, Daniel and Ezekiel, there is nothing written in the Old Testament about the celestial city, streets of gold, walls of jasper, or gates of pearl. One sees throne room and court room protocol and the Father more as a ruler or a judge at court. One does not see the concept of eating at the Father's table in His house, or living in rooms or mansions in His house.

David writes about the exaltation, kingship, and the glory of God on His throne, but nothing tangible. Isaiah talks about Lucifer wanting to ascend to the north. Job writes about God descending from the north in all His splendor, but again, there is no imagery. What if someone lived their whole life and the only hope was "north" without any conversation about a way to get there? They are only hoping that God is coming down to them.

We know nothing about the City of God until Jesus refers to the Father's house having many rooms or mansions. There is no mention of colors, details, or descriptions of Heaven until the Book of Revelation. Almost all Christian theology of Heaven comes from the book of Revelation and also a few statements from Jesus.

Most major religions, especially western, believe in a literal place to go for eternal life. Most eastern religions talk about freedom and peace and having their soul set free.

When we examine the biblical description of Heaven, we can find it pictured the way we would expect first-century people to picture it. Those in the first century describe the Heavenly city in terms familiar to them. Until the time of gunpowder, cities were surrounded with thick walls and sturdy gates, and inscriptions were commonly placed on or over the gates. So, in Revelation we read about "a great, high wall with twelve gates" (21:12), and the thickness of the walls were vast, measuring about two hundred feet (v. 17). Of course, there would be no need in Heaven to have walls, but that is the way it is pictured nonetheless.

The first indication that humans would go to Heaven was when Jesus mentioned mansions in the Father's house.

SEVEN VIEWS OF HEAVEN

A. Heaven: Judaism

Since it is one of the oldest and most influential religions in existence, Judaism might be considered a primary source of our notions of Heaven, but it is not. In fact, there is almost no clear indication of a Heaven or afterlife in the Jewish scriptures at all. The Law, consisting of the first five books in the Old Testament, gives no information about the afterlife. Believers have the most exhaustive account of creation, and one story of Enoch being taken up by God, but that is it. The entire Old Testament scriptures tell readers almost nothing about Heaven. Believers are given a few glimpses of God's throne room, but there is no indication of man's state of being after death. This has led to a lot of Jewish debate on the subject.

Two typical positions are those of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees believed that there was an implied notion of an afterlife. They did believe in eternal punishment because *sheol* teaching was common; however, it was not teaching about Heaven. The Sadducees pointed out that there was no biblical evidence of an eternal afterlife. Over the millennia, Jews have come to believe in various versions of Heaven, some of which they believe will occur after the Messiah comes and will involve the righteous dead coming back to life. They believed they would be resurrected to rule and reign in the millennial kingdom and also cease to exist or go into some kind of state of bliss and happiness afterwards. Orthodox Jews are silent, saying, "only God knows." Those Jews believe that God has an unrevealed plan.

B. Paradise: Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism is one of the world's oldest monotheistic religions. It was founded approximately 3500 years ago by the Prophet Zoroaster in ancient Iran. It exalts a deity of wisdom, Ahura Mazda (*Wise Lord*), as its Supreme Being. Major features of Zoroastrianism, such as a messiah, Heaven and Hell, and free will have likely influenced other religious systems. Zoroastrianism claims over 200,000 adherents worldwide.

It was the ancient Persians who gave the word "paradise," which means a walled garden or park. Zoroastrianism was among the first of any religion to teach that when someone dies, they will go to paradise. It claims that everyone will eventually get into Heaven, although it might take a while.

The paradise of Zoroastrianism is attained the fourth day after death by crossing the Bridge of the Separator, which widens when the righteous approach it. The righteous soul crosses the bridge and is met by a beautiful maiden who is the physical and feminine embodiment of all his good works on earth. He is then escorted into the House of Song to await the Last Day. On this day, everyone will be purified and live in a new world absent of evil and full of youthful rejoicing.

C. Paradise: Islam

The Islamic version of Heaven is a paradise for those whose good works have outweighed the bad as determined by the straight path laid out in the Quran. Heaven is a garden where the faithful lie upon couches in a climate-controlled environment surrounded by “bashful, dark-eyed virgins, chaste as the sheltered eggs of ostriches.” They will drink from crystal goblets and silver vessels as “immortal youths” hover about them looking like “scattered pearls.” The believers will be clothed in green silk and brocade and will wear silver bracelets, and they will “drink a pure wine” drawn from Allah’s own source as a reward for their striving and patience.

Some say each man will have 72 virgins, but Islam actually teaches 72 rooms of virgins.

D. Moksha: Hinduism

Eastern religions do not really have notions of Heaven as a physical space like those in the West. Instead, they usually offer some kind of release from illusion and suffering in the present world. In the Hindu philosophical portions of the *Vedas*, Hinduism’s oldest sacred text, the notions of the self and afterlife are developed.

What is real is called *Brahman*, the ultimate reality that transcends sensory experiences. Unfortunately, people live in ignorance of Brahman and act according to their illusions. This action (Laws of Karma) causes all to participate in the cycle of death and rebirth, from which it’s difficult to escape.

If you can escape your ignorance and be enlightened, then you can be absorbed into Brahman and exist in a state of happiness. You are now a spiritual being in a spiritual world, released from the cycle of death and rebirth. This release is called *moksha*. Moksha is basically a release from the cycle of pain, death and rebirth into a transcendent state of what some may see as a “free spirit” state.

This is a polytheistic view, because there are multiple gods and multiple ways to become enlightened.

E. Nirvana: Buddhism

Buddhism believes in the four noble truths of Buddha. One of these is that suffering is caused by desire – the desire to have, and also the desire to be.

Buddhist monks exist without much in the way of material goods. They practice being very calm and hum because they do not want desire to cause them to sin.

They believe that desire is *tanha*, or a burning that keeps them caught in the web of illusion that is their ego. The Buddha taught that desire is a flame that burns a person, causes suffering, and keeping them tied to the cycle of death and rebirth because the flame continues burning into the next life. This is a belief in reincarnation, like Hinduism.

What they hope for is Nirvana, or the extinguishing of that flame (of desire), which is also the end of suffering. This afterlife would be more a state of enlightenment than a state of existence.

Cambodia is an unreached people group with almost no Christian witness. While ministering there, Buddhist monks explained that this is a way of life that keeps their family fed. The priests said that they do not even believe what they teach about nirvana.

They believe that at Creation, a seven-headed snake split into two. In the explosion, the heads went seven different directions and created the world. They went straight to the snake!

F. Heaven: Mormon

The Mormons believe in three levels of Heaven: the celestial, terrestrial, and telestial. The celestial Heaven is where all believers in Christ go. The terrestrial is the highest level of Heaven and where God is located.

“As God is, man can become. As man is, God once was.” They believe each person can become a supreme being and rule their own universe. Each person who reaches the terrestrial Heaven will be one of the sons of God. They also believe that angels are procreated from God and His wives.

The church hired a publicist to help people to change their view of them when they became outlawed in the United States as heretics. They reinvented themselves as a family-oriented group years ago, and to this day, they adhere to family values.

They believe that all Mormons can go to the terrestrial Heaven, but the prerequisite is that a member of one's family must do a two-year missionary term.

The third level of Heaven is telestial, and this is where people who reject Christ go. This is as far as one can go when they get out of Hell.

In order of ascent, this would be telestial, celestial, and then the highest level they believe is terrestrial.

G. Heaven: Christianity

The typical Christian notion of Heaven as their home for the future is one of singing and rejoicing before God in a "new Heaven and a new earth," living a real life.

Some believe that John's view of Heaven was given so that people could begin to comprehend the idea. John's view seems to mimic a king's palace on the earth with walls, jewels and gold everywhere. Some would argue that this means these descriptions may not be as literal as some would think.

It also reflects Christianity's roots in Judaism, because this new Heaven contains a city called New Jerusalem. There are elaborate descriptions of the city in the book of Revelation. New Jerusalem has a wall and twelve gates, and on each gate, is the name of one of the tribes of Israel along with an angel.

There are twelve foundations, one for each of the twelve apostles. The size of the New Jerusalem is 1400 miles square with a 200-foot wall. The structure itself is made of all kinds of precious stones; some of which have not yet been identified on this earth.

There is a river of "the water of life," which flows from God's throne, and trees of life line the banks of the river and produce fruit every month. Believers will have God's name written on their foreheads, and everyone will have a new name in Heaven. Scripture also says that all pain, tears, and death will disappear forever.



*Heaven is
a real
place
where
people live
real lives.*

Some see the Heavenly walled city as an illustration of peace that would have identified with the Jewish context of peace, which was to live in a walled city filled with treasures. Some Bible scholars propose that the imagery given to believers by John in the book of Revelation is that of a fortified city with gates, guards and treasures because that would be the only way the people of that day could relate to God's house. The things in Heaven were in many ways familiar, although supernatural, to the people of John's time. Perhaps if John received his revelation of Heaven in the present day, it might appear more contemporary in nature and involve imagery more familiar with our times. Nevertheless, believers know this for sure:

"But as it is written: 'Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man The things which God has prepared for those who love Him.'"

- 1 Corinthians 2:9

Heaven is a real place where people live a real life. It is not sitting on clouds, playing harps, and talking to ancient people. Why would there be streets if there was no place to go? Why would there be rooms if there was no reason to go into them? Why would there be mansions? Why would God re-create the earth if He was never coming back? Why would He re-create the Heavens if people were never meant to explore them?

These lessons on Heaven be a fascinating journey about heavenly bodies, crowns, kings and priests, heavenly worship services and all the choirs mentioned in Heaven. The angelic choir, the elder choir, the animal choir, the choir of the redeemed and many more.