

## ***Recollected: On The Afterlife***

Well, friends! Let's begin with prayer...

### ***Prayer:***

### ***Preface:***

Today is our last message in this series that we've been in, which has taken old messages and revisited, remixed, fixed them. I've enjoyed it, because it's forced me to think about what I once believed and whether I still believe it, and I think it's been helpful to say things again that need said again, you know?

And today we're talking about "the Afterlife," which means, more or less, that we're talking about Heaven and Hell.

Except there's a basic problem we have to deal with.

### ***A Basic Problem:***

"Hell" and "Heaven" as *words* are barely useful anymore. Our ideas about Heaven & Hell are so confused by movies and books and even the easy-to-understand stories we've heard as little kids in Sunday school that clarity is gone. Just gone.

I say "Hell" and some of us think of flames and burning...or waiting on our router to reset. Hell is shorthand in our world for the entire realm of bad things: annoying stuff and things terrible, and evil, and wrong by all standards. Hell as a theological term borders on meaninglessness to most people, and even to many of us Christians.

I say "Heaven" and some of us think of clouds and light and soft Muzak. Or we think of our lives, now, but everything's fat-

free and we can warp places.

When it comes to the afterlife, it's movies and TV, the occasional song or interesting story that wins in our minds and hearts, not the full breadth of Scripture. Some of us do go to whatever simple stories were told to us in Sunday School as little ones, and some of us have clung to only this or that image from the New Testament, excluding all the others, and tossed it in a bowl with a little bit of Greek Mythology, maybe some Harry Potter or Anime. I don't know.

Our thinking on what happens when we die has been short-circuited by the things that flit through our minds when the topic comes up.

We don't think about "New Heavens & New Earth." We don't consider what it would mean for mercy and justice and God's power if, say, God allowed the devil his own tiny kingdom to rule forever, alongside God's, especially if that kingdom is much more populated than God's would be, given the numbers down through the ages.

We don't think about the impact that the daily choices we make have on our eternal souls and new bodies. We don't think about new bodies at all, even though Easter keeps coming around. And no one wants to mention how boring it would be to be in a church service forever, because we'll seem less holy than the other people who are hiding how bored they'd be.

When it comes to the afterlife, we aren't honest enough, and we're not scriptural enough.

## **Hell**

Let's talk about Hell. It's a hell of a thing to talk about. There's not a hope in Hell that I can do it well, and someone'll give me Hell for this when I'm done, but what the Hell does it matter, really, right?

"Hell" is just a word in our world, a less-offensive replacement for worse words. It's shorthand for daily annoyances, but in the right context implies a terror and a pain and an evil that all the worse images in all the world, or our hearts, can't express. It's somehow bad traffic and being choked to death.

And that actually makes sense, you know. Because "Hell" as a theological term, is meaningful. It's not just a light-duty, easily accessibly swear word. It's meaningful. But the meaning isn't good.

### **Hell: "Gehenna"**

The word itself, like all sorts of other words, comes from an old english word that comes from an old german word that probably comes from an old somewhere word and it means to more or less "cover over" something. When we read our english New Testaments, the word that we read as "hell" is actually "Gehenna." Gehenna was a literal place, southwest of Jerusalem, which was just terrible; the name means "Valley of Hinnom." Gahanna is a suburb of Columbus. It's a different place. Mostly.

In the time of Jeremiah, Gehenna was a place where child sacrifices by fire were made to evil gods...and it's image never got better, really. By Jesus' time it was a landfill, a trash dump, with all the things that unregulated trash dumps have: rats and rot and flies and bones and secrets and everything

everyone didn't want or found not useful anymore. Dead bodies--of animals and criminals--were left there. It was an unclean place--literally and in the Old Testament Jewish sense--a place where you touched filth and became contagious with filth, passing it on to everyone around you, became untouchable and diseased. Gehenna would catch fire now and then, here and there, and was a valley below the city, so the smoke would rise up and everyone could see it.

And because Gehenna was so public and so universally seen as terrible, as a cursed place--and if you were a have-not who had to scavenge there for food, you were seen as cursed, too, right?--it became shorthand for sort of place those who reject God end up. It became the image that Jesus and the apostles after him used to talk about the sort of place where those who reject God end up. This burning, filthy, open landfill right near the city became hell, became a symbol of the afterlife for those who reject God.

And people just mine this Gehenna for imagery that's shocking, really. It's a place of "weeping and gnashing of teeth," (Matt 8, 25) "torment" (Rev 14:10-11). Hell is considered a place of "eternal fire and worms" (Matt 25:41), of "fire and sulfur," (Rev 14) or "outer darkness"--and I think of the sort of darkness that's unsafe, outside the city, in a trash pit where the fire's all gone out and you hear hungry rats whispering around you (Matt 8:12).

### ***Hell: Images Meant to Convey***

"Outer darkness" doesn't always jibe with "eternal fire," a point that reminds us that the images of Hell in the New Testament *aren't literal descriptions*, but powerful images meant to convey how terrible a place it would be to inhabit.

What these images are meant to convey is that Hell is the place where people are eternally separated from God. In 2 Thessalonians we read that those who don't submit to the truth that Jesus is Lord, change their lives in light of this news, that "They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might" (cf. 2 Thess 1:8-10). Jesus tells us in John that people have "loved the darkness more than the light," and in the end, Hell is getting the darkness that's been loved, only all the time (John 3:19).

And it makes sense that Gehenna would become the poster child of that place, too, because there is no way you could be there in the trash pit, and be clean in a Jewish ceremonial sense. You were dirty, and couldn't approach God or any of God's People. Hell is the place without all the goodness and redemption and hope that God showers on all humanity, in the commons, obedient or not, worshipping God or not.

### ***Hell: Avoid it.***

And we're told by Jesus to avoid Hell no matter what it costs us, that if an eyeball or a hand is leading us away from faithfulness, leading us to sin and to Hell, then we should tear out our eye or chop off our hand, because anything is better than Hell (Matt 5:27ff). I think Jesus doesn't mean this literally, but many Christians have thought he does. A reasonable person would rather be separated from their hand than God, is the point, I think.

### ***Debates: The Fate of Non-Christians***

And questions come up that I have no final answers for, or none so complete that they wouldn't take over the rest of this

morning's time. You know these questions: What about those who aren't saved? Those who reject God's right to rule the universe. There's a debate, you know? And faithful Christians are on all sides of it.

### ***Unsaved: Traditional View***

There's a traditional view, which is the one many of us have been taught, which is that the torment of Hell is eternal. It is ongoing, forever. This view is supported by church tradition, by certain frameworks of what justice means, by language about the fires of Hell going on "forever and ever," particularly in Revelation. The fact that Jesus contrasts "eternal hell" with "eternal life," suggests that there's a "forever" component to both sides (cf. Matt 25).

Those who argue against it suggest that this view is far too influenced by Greek philosophy, which begins with a basic premise that the soul is immortal, than it is by the Bible, which doesn't start with this view. They would point out the way language is used symbolically throughout the Bible, particularly when it comes to judgment, such as the way Isaiah says the fires that come on Edom "shall go up forever," and "burn night and day," but obviously still aren't burning, even though Edom doesn't even exist anymore. They suggest that unending suffering is inconsistent with a God who is Love, and also with the way we see God being entirely victorious at the end of history--when Jesus is "over all" (Eph 1:10ff) and God is "all in all" (1 Cor 15:28) and "all things" are reconciled to God (Col 1:20).

### ***Unsaved: Annihilationist View***

There is another view, the Annihilationist view, which is that there is actually destruction of the soul, immortality belongs

to God and God alone, and it's only gifted to those who entrust themselves to Jesus. Adam & Eve never ate the fruit from the Tree of Life, after all. This view would say the punishment is eternal, but it's eternal in the sense of permanent, not "ongoing." The view suggests that those who reject God do experience torment and separation from God on the other side of death, but that there will come a day when all things are finally set right, and at that day "the wicked shall be no more," and highlight many of the New Testament passages that talk about the "destruction" that faces people who reject God. The emphasis is on the way Jesus destroys even death, seen in passages like Revelation 20, when "Death and [the place of the dead]" are thrown into a lake of fire and when the author of Hebrews says that Jesus came "to destroy the one who has the power of death, the devil" (Heb 2). Christians are to be those who "bring back a sinner from wandering" and so "save the sinner's soul from death" (James 5:20).

Those who argue against this position say that this view reads too much into terms like "death" and "corruption" and "destruction," and that these shouldn't be interpreted to mean annihilation. They would argue that "sin against an infinite God requires infinite punishment," although Annihilationists would probably want to discuss their view of God, I think. They also suggest it promotes a view of Hell that is without an "incentive to trust God for salvation."

(This section summarizes the arguments of "The Hell Debate" in *Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology*, by Boyd & Eddy.)

### **A Question: Finality of Death?**

Both of these views have to deal with another question, which is if there's room on the other side of death for choices for or against Jesus. Is there room on the other side of death for choices for or against Jesus?

But Heaven relates to this question in one really big way--and stay with me here--because what we call Heaven is more or less the space between death and the real hope of our salvation. Heaven is the space in between death and the real hope of our salvation. And the hope of our salvation is a resurrected life in a resurrected world.

NT Wright has famously said that what Christians are all about is "life after death," but what we should be all about is "life after 'life after death.'"

### ***Regarding Heaven: 'Life After Death'***

The Bible doesn't talk about Heaven in the way we talk about Heaven. When we say Heaven, we mean the place we go where we die, right? And we "live" there, *sort of*.

I mean we have conscious awareness, a sort of living, although not with bodies, *per se*. We think of Heaven and think of something sort of non-physical, non-material, we don't end up ghosts, *really*, but something like them. We certainly don't think we'll need to worry about, for example, eating and dressing ourselves.

This is the place Christians go where we die, right? A place of peace and rest and relief from grief and trouble in the presence of God.

But that place is never called Heaven in the New Testament.

And that place is not the final place we go when we die; it's not the final hope of our salvation, and Jesus didn't die so we could end up there forever. We're told that when we Christians die we go to be with the Lord. We go to rest. We go to peace. We go, as Paul puts it, to be "at home with the Lord."

Jesus uses some of his last words to tell the thief on the cross, dying next to him, that "...Today you'll be with me in paradise." At our death, we Christians enter into peace and rest, with full access to God, but that period of rest isn't the goal. And you can call it Heaven if you want. But if all we look forward to is "life after death," consciousness and rest and peace in the presence of God, we are not wanting enough. We've got to dream more. Because what the Bible tells us to look forward to is better than Paradise, better than that time in-between a Christian's death and what comes after it.

### ***"Life After 'Life After Death'"***

What we should look forward to is what NT Wright calls "Life after, 'life after death.'"

Even those who are right now in Paradise are still looking forward to something even better than being at home with the Lord. They are looking forward to God making his home with us.

They are still waiting for something better than paradise. They are waiting for the Resurrection of the dead, the Resurrection of the world, "New Creation," "New Heavens & New Earth." Restored bodies in a restored world. This is the prize. This is the hope. This is the thing that's better than Heaven, better than the life after death.

The passage from Isaiah that was read to us gives us a glimpse into the world to come. Revelation 21 keeps it in the same vein, quoting Isaiah, when we read:

***1 Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,”[a] for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’[b] or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”***

***5 He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”***

***6 He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. 7 Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.***

Later we read that this is a place with enough food, enough medicine, enough wealth, enough space, “enough” for everyone. All needs are supplied for. Isaiah tells us it’s a place where work is always meaningful, and rest isn’t interrupted, and all the animosity and estrangement and bitterness and

division of this world—all oppression, all racism, all fear—even nature's most basic predator and pray division is gone.

Paul tells us creation is groaning for this, longing for the day when this will come. In New Heavens & New Earth there is no death. There is no revenge or reactionary violence. There is no fear, no pain, no decay. No one language or ethnicity or race is more privileged or more punished than another. Reconciliation is normal, and relationships are good and easy, and all the worst things we bring to the table--they're gone. We just don't bring them anymore. This present world order passes away fully, and gives way to a world in which all is well and the only tears are tears of pleasure and really great jokes at no one's expense. Evil is destroyed (Rev 20:10). We'll become what we were always meant to be, fully and finally, the image of God perfected in us, equal in grace, none of us more privileged than another, because we all are lifted up together. "Becoming more like Jesus all the time" will give way to having become like him completely, and everything we do with ourselves will bring blessing and worship. We will share in the glory of God (Rom 5:2, 2 Pet 1:4).

You at your best, your best version of yourself, will seem faded and outdated and worthy of your pity compared to what you will be as you live in the touchable presence of the Lord. And none of this will be immaterial, will be imagined in our heads. It will be as real as teargas containers and handguns melted down and made into shovels and spades. And if I saw anyone of you right now as you'll be, I would be tempted, as C.S. Lewis puts it, to worship you.

This is "Life after, 'life after death.'" This is our Christian hope.

It's what those in Paradise long for, too.

***You get what you live into.***

I don't know if there is choice on the other side of death. I don't know if there is room for those who have already passed on from this life to choose for or against God. I just don't know.

What is clear is that when it comes to *both* the fate of those who reject God *and* the fate of those who pledge allegiance to God is this: You get what you want. You get what you want. Or, I think better than this: You get what you live into. You get what you live into.

***“Living Into” Eternity: A Metaphor***

What I mean is this: We become specialized in the world. Most of us have spent years and years and many dollars and time being fitted for the place or job we are in. We become fitted for the place we are in.

It seems to me that Eternity is something like this. That we are daily training ourselves for the Afterlife, daily putting time and money and relationships and all sorts of things in either the direction of Hell, or it's opposite, Paradise and what's even better than Paradise.

It may be the case that at death, we have become so specialized that there is no turning back, and it is a joke to think that anyone who has spent a life choosing against God could somehow choose for Him on the other side of death.

It may be that there is still wiggle room on the other side of death to choose for Christ or against him, to put off whatever

clothes we wear, “put on Christ,” as Paul says, and choose to change. I don’t know. I don’t *think* the Bible is as clear on this as we want it to be, but I have been wrong often enough to plant my flag in very few places, and am always biased by my hope in God’s mercy.

You get the sense that doesn’t really happen that often. But I hope for it. I pray the God of mercy we serve is more miraculously merciful than I have been. And if death isn’t the final moment of choice, it’s the revealing one. We become more specialized with every choice we make, and some old dogs can’t be taught new tricks, and our actions really do reveal who are you on your way to being. What have your actions this past week revealed about who you are becoming like?

And even if it’s not at death, but on the other side of it some way down the road, there will come a day when choices won’t be able to be undone. Jesus will have returned to Earth, and the reign established at his resurrection, which we have been declaring, will be made complete. He will hand the world over to the Father, and reign with Him; New Creation will break out all over, and we who rest in paradise with Him, or we who are here serving as his ambassadors and not-so-secret agents in the world, we will be changed, “in a twinkling,” because everything will be changed.

Let me point out some things here.

### ***Conclusions: Faithfulness***

First, we should make our calling and election sure. We should be specializing in becoming like Jesus. We are headed to Paradise, and when Paradise ends, we are going to be alive in

a world that is everything good you can ever imagine. In the meantime Jesus tells us that our choices today have eternal consequences for us. For you. Paul tells us that at Jesus' return a fire will sweep through our lives, and we may be saved, but it'll be like someone being saved from their own burning house; they're alive, but everything that they've worked for, built, treasured, is all gone. Our work needs to be work that can survive all judgment against it.

Who and what judges you right now? And is the judgment that's made valid? We're blind to what we are blind to. How can we help see ourselves, our works, more truthfully?

### ***Conclusion: Outreach***

And, too, Hell is real. There is separation from God for those who reject Jesus' right to rule over their lives. And for however long it might last, it's terrible.

We have Good News, and it's this:

In Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, New Creation has begun, evil is being ended, God has re-established his right to rule over everything, and I have become a citizen in this New Kingdom, given my allegiance to God and have all the rights of a child born here, and this Nation, this Kingdom is spreading over the world, over the universe, and when it finally fully arrives at Jesus' return, death will die, evil will end, all the troubles that you've ever had will become old memories that don't cause pain, the high will be brought low, and the low raised up, and joy will be the only thing that anyone knows.

In whatever way you can communicate the Good News of

what God has done in Jesus honestly, personally, and compellingly, do it.

### ***Conclusion: Creativity***

And we know what the end of the story is like. We know how good life will be when Paradise itself gives way to something better and more permanent.

How *on earth* should we live, then? What should we do with ourselves in light of the world to come? Where should our time and treasure and talent go? And how can we creatively subvert the evil we see around us, and remind those that take part in it that there is a Good News? This ties into evangelism, this ties into how we live our lives.

We Christians, wherever we go, we live up to our Father's expectations of us, we live as residents and aliens, gifts to this world, curers and blessers. While we wait for homecoming, for God's home to be made on earth, we need to creatively figure out how to build systems, institutions, programs, and all the rest that help others experience some tiny little bit of the life of love and joy that we'll experience someday. We stand with those who can't stand, speak for those who can't speak, always side with the poor, the orphan, the widow, and the oppressed. We reject scapegoats, because Jesus was the last one. Some of us will even take his place, suffering alongside and on behalf of and in place of those who suffer, the way he suffered for us, because the love of Christ compels us. We protest evil, fight it, because God made us to fight it, even as we weep, and grieve, and rage at the pain of the world.

How on earth should we live, if we're living up to the way of

Kingdom Come? What chances do you have right now to live up to the world as it will be?

### ***Conclusion: Hope***

Live with hope, at least. There is peace and rest, and our loved ones in the Lord are alive with them both right now...but we all look forward to a bigger promise, to be Resurrected into a New Life in a New Heavens and New Earth Creation, without death and fear and pain and hurt, and with all the great things that come from these awesome bodies we have: meaningful eating, drinking, working, playing, resting in the company of safe, authentic, kind, people, forever. Maybe in the middle of a pandemic, when we've been so isolated, we can realize just how important hugs, and shared meals, and, you know, in-person conviviality really are.

### ***Conclusion: Prayer***

So pray for God's Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. Pray for Jesus' return. Pray for those one or two or three of yours who do not yet realize the Good in our Good News. And pray that we, as Smoky Row, can live with tireless hope as we creatively work to create places in this world that are like our true homeland. Use your voice, use your power, and line them up with the world to come. Make your calling sure and give no ground to Hell; God will just have to take it back anyway. I believe in us, and the God who lives in us.