

Heaven

^{NRS} **Isaiah 65:17-18, 25** For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. ¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent-- its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.

^{NRS} **Mark 12:19-25** "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no child, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. ²⁰ There were seven brothers; the first married and, when he died, left no children; ²¹ and the second married her and died, leaving no children; and the third likewise; ²² none of the seven left children. Last of all the woman herself died. ²³ In the resurrection whose wife will she be? For the seven had married her." ²⁴ Jesus said to them, "Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God? ²⁵ For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.

^{NRS} **Revelation 21:1-4** Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

Heaven

In this series of sermons on topics chosen by you, I have chosen a suggested topic that I know very little about. I would suggest that doesn't put me in too bad a light. Not many people know much about heaven. I would claim that, in fact, there isn't much that we can know about heaven.

In 1961, Yuri Gagarin became the first person to reach outer space. He announced that he didn't see any God out there.

Part of the difficulty is that none of us is unambiguously good or completely evil. "Even the saint remains a sinner and needs forgiveness and even the sinner is a saint in so far as he stands under the divine forgiveness."¹

So much of what we see and hear about heaven and hell is an oppressive and simplistic form of moralism in popular religion that sees our destiny "as the consequence of an almost mathematical calculation of our [individual] private worth."² In place of that, consider a theology of grace, a gift that isn't bound up tightly works, but that is given to people who like Paul, find that "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." (Romans 7:19)

If we assume that eternal life is an exact expression rather than a symbolic phrase, then eternal life isn't just the unending future. It isn't something that starts after you die. Eternal life has no beginning and no end. It isn't something that you earn or get. It's something you merge into.

"Eternal life is unceasing joy in the completion of reconciled life: 'the reconciliation of *all things*' (Col.1:15-20) – reconciliation between human beings and God,"³ reconciliation among us, within us, and with the rest of creation.

"All of the biblical images of eternal life are communal [not individual] – a new heaven and a new earth, a marriage banquet, a new Jerusalem coming down from heaven, a choir of countless people of every nation and language singing endless praise to God."⁴

“By contrast, hell is simply wanting to be oneself apart from God’s grace and in isolation from others. It is the hellish weariness and boredom of a life focused entirely on itself. It is not an arbitrary divine punishment at the end of history. Hell is the self-destructive resistance to the eternal love of God.”⁵

There are biblical passages that give sharp warnings and suggest a double outcome of history. They speak of wonderful reward and terrible punishment. (Matt. 24:36-42; 25:31-46) But there are also scriptures that point to the redemption of all things. (1 Cor. 15:22; Rom. 11:32)

Karl Bart suggested that rather than trying to explain the tension between these two views, we should, based on God’s abundant love, hope and pray for more forgiveness far greater than we would desire or even be able to imagine.

^{NRS} **1 John 3:2** Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.³ And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

“As a rule, the biblical writers were not even interested in the details of ‘what it will be like.’ They did not worry about the future because they understood their own and the world’s future to be in the hands of the God who in Jesus Christ has triumphed and will triumph over all of the powers of suffering, sin, injustice and death. They had no time to sit around speculating and arguing about when, where, and how new life in the kingdom of God would come; they were too busy living here and now in joyful and confident expectation of it.”⁶

Calvin wrote, “It is foolish and rash to inquire concerning unknown matters more deeply than God wants us to know.”⁷

Jesus said that he didn’t know all of the answers. ^{NRS} **Mark 13:32** "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

^{NRS} **1 John 3:2** Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

“It is unwise for Christians to claim any knowledge of either the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell; or to be too certain about any details of the kingdom of God in which history is consummated.”⁸

Jesus spoke about “coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matt 26:64) Like so many statements about the future, perhaps we would be more cautious if we heard this as symbolic language. Otherwise, we begin to focus on where he will appear. New York? Palestine? South Africa? Rome? We’d do well to recall that his previous arrival wasn’t in the place or mode that anybody would have expected. “The point obviously is not *how* and *where* he will come but that God in Christ will be the Judge and Savior of the whole world at the end of history.”⁹

^{NRS} **Colossians 1:15** He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;¹⁶ for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers-- all things have been created through him and for him.¹⁷ He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,²⁰ and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

^{NRS} **Matthew 24:36** "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.³⁷ For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark,³⁹ and

they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man.⁴⁰ Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left.⁴¹ Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.⁴² Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

^{NRS} **Matthew 25:31** "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory.³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?'³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?'³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels;⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?'⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

^{NRS} **1 Corinthians 15:22** For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.

^{NRS} **Romans 11:32** For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

¹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, p 408

² Douglas John Hall, *Confessing the Faith* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1996) p 515

³ Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2004) p 346

⁴ Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2004) p 346-7

⁵ Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2004) p 347

⁶ Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine, Rev Ed* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1994) p 382

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.25.6

⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol 2* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949) p 294

⁹ Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine, Rev Ed* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1994) p 383