

Is Heaven Real? Does God Send People to Hell?
Be Ready to Share 2016 Summer Sermon Series
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TEXT: Revelation 20:11-21:8



If you have your Bibles, and I hope you do, I invite you to keep it open to Revelation 20 & 21. We are in week 11 of our summer equipping series, *Be Ready*. The goal of this series is that all of us would grow in our confidence and ability to share the truths of the Christian faith. If we share the good news of Jesus Christ with those around us, we can be sure that questions will come, and 2 Timothy 4:2 calls us to *Be Ready*, share truth thoughtfully, and do the work of an evangelist.

The question that we are considering today is what happens after death? Is there an afterlife? Is heaven real? Does God send people to hell? These questions have some natural ties to the very first question we had in this series—the question of God’s existence. You may remember that during that sermon, I shared the results of a Pew Research Study released in 2015 that indicated that up to 83% of Americans affirm a belief in God, or at least a universal spirit of some kind. Of those polled, 63% claimed *absolute certainty*, and the other 20% were *fairly certain*. Only 9% were emphatic atheists¹. Now atheism is definitely on the rise—there is no question about that, but belief in God is not dead, though more people today might be hiding or suppressing that belief.

So based on that study, it shouldn’t surprise us that many people in America still believe in an afterlife of some kind. If God exists, then an afterlife of some kind makes sense. Depending on the age bracket, somewhere between 67-75% of Americans believe heaven exists. The number does drop when considering hell; somewhere between 55-59% of Americans believe in hell (in

¹ [http://www.pewresearch.org/question-search/?keyword=belief in god](http://www.pewresearch.org/question-search/?keyword=belief%20in%20god)
<http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/>

case you are wondering, the older Millennial generation – born between 1981-89 – are the most skeptical and least likely to believe in heaven and hell).² Keep that in mind, and then just step back and consider history and various cultures throughout history: the honest observation that has to be accepted is that a very significant portion of humanity (most of humanity), throughout history, has believed in an afterlife of some kind. Why? Evolution can't explain this, but the Bible can. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says: "*God has placed eternity in the human heart.*"

Even though there is a growing hostility towards the Christian Faith, a significant portion of our neighbors do believe that God exists and heaven and hell are real. ***Our job is to make sure they understand God, and Eternity, rightly—Biblically.*** So many people are so close, yet so far away from the truth. We cannot be quiet; we have got to start the conversation, ask questions, listen, and tell others our story and what the Bible says.

The Bible says much about heaven and hell, and it is certainly more appealing to think of one than the other, but the Bible declares that both exist. Revelation 20:11-21:8 provides a very clear picture of both places and answers a number of questions that we have, and those around us have.

No book in the Bible has caused more curiosity, confusion, and disagreement than the book of Revelation. Some people are obsessed with the book and tend to spend all of their time trying to crack some code; and some of these people have come up with some of the craziest ideas imaginable. These are the people who see things in their toast, and these people have often caused some of us to freak out in the grocery store if the total for bread and milk is \$6.66. – Perhaps you have freaked out in that moment and grabbed a pack of bubble gum to change the number, as if Spearmint can conquer the devil. Others are so scared and baffled by the book of Revelation that they avoid the book completely. For them, the book of Revelation is like that really awkward cousin we try to forget exists.

As I studied this passage and looked at various portions of Revelation this week, I was stunned at how beautiful and powerful this last book of the Bible is. The Bible is not a collection of random, disjointed writings over time. It's one book telling one story (that is the story of a Creating God who is Holy and Sovereign and Loving and faithful in redeeming His Creation from sin, evil, and death. And Revelation is the end of that story, yet it is also the beginning of a new story.

Part of what can make Revelation challenging is the very nature of the writing. In terms of literary genre, it is actually a combination of 3 things: it's a letter to the seven churches in Asia; it's an apocalypse; and it's a prophecy. Originally, John wrote this book of the Bible to encourage and challenge a group of churches to keep the faith. A key message is *Don't Quit*,

² http://www.pewforum.org/files/2015/11/201.11.03_RLS_II_full_report.pdf page 7.

Jesus has secured victory! And this original message to these churches is also for us today. Do you feel like you are the only one living for Jesus? Are you feeling that pressure? Don't quit! Has sickness or disease decimated your daily routine? Don't quit! That's the message of Revelation. God is going to reward all his faithful followers, and heaven will not have hospitals. Amen!

The book of Revelation is also an *apocalypse*, which carries the idea of "unveiling" something that was hidden. It is a type of writing we aren't nearly as familiar with today. The book of Revelation is also a prophecy. Its language contains a lot of OT imagery. I was awed at how much Old Testament is in Revelation, and I am so glad we don't shy away from the Old Testament here at Kenwood. The better you know your Old Testament, the more you will see in Revelation.

Add to that the fact that there is a great deal of symbolism in this book. There are at least four categories of symbolism in the book of Revelation: Objects (sword); Numbers (7, 12, 666, 144,000), Events (usually catastrophic); and Creatures (usually weird). These are used in symbolic ways throughout the book. **John is like an artist, but instead of paint, he uses words.** The symbols are intended to convey truth that fuels our faith and reminds us that God is good, and Christ's victory over sin and evil and suffering is certain.

The portion of Revelation that we are considering today speaks into a very real temptation that many people in our culture face today, and quite frankly, many Christians can feel this as well—***the temptation to minimize the significance of the afterlife.*** Saying you believe in heaven, and maybe hell, for a Pew Research survey is one thing, but truly living your entire life in view of eternity is very different. A casual nod that heaven and hell probably exist doesn't alter your lifestyle; it doesn't guide your words; it doesn't affect your wallet. A casual belief in heaven and hell doesn't change your parenting; it doesn't motivate you in your marriage; it doesn't convict you to serve in your local church; and it doesn't propel you into your community with the gospel message.

But, seeing that and having a robust, biblical understanding of heaven and hell and the plan and work of God to bring all things together, changes every portion of your life. You spend your money differently; you treat others differently; and you hold onto this world, and the things in it, much more loosely.

Now I know what some of you have heard, and might believe: Some say that a person can be so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good. (Johnny Cash & Oliver Wendell Holmes) But this just is not true.

The central idea of Revelation 20:11-21:8 is this: ***Life in this world is utterly serious, because what you make of God here, and how you live now, will determine how you meet God in***

the end, and where you will spend eternity. This passage teaches us that Judgment and Hell is certain for all God's enemies, and dwelling with God in a new and perfect place is certain for all God's people. Our passage teaches us this with two scenes. Both scenes will actually occur one day.

Judgment and Hell is certain for all God's Enemies

The first scene is in Revelation 20:11-15; it's the final judgment. It is like a courtroom. The first thing that we see is the great white throne of God, which signifies purity and power, The sovereign power, infinite holiness, and divine majesty of this moment is terrifying, such that John says even the creation reacts and seems to flee, but where can it go? *You can't escape God.* This is not a moment where people question God, hide from Him, or tell a joke. This is a most serious and sober moment. The dead, both great and small (meaning Hollywood Stars, Political Leaders, Hall of Fame Athletes, and those no one remembers), all now stand before God Almighty. No matter who they were, no matter when and where they died, they stand before God. There are no invisible or hidden graves before God, and there was no one who ever lived that does not answer to Him. Even the depths of the sea are not a refuge for the dead. All stand before God, and the standard is the same for each one.

Books are opened and the dead are judged according to what is written in those books. And, friend, no word or deed is missing, or forgotten. In Matthew 12:36: Jesus said, *"I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak."* Each person is judged, and even every careless word is recorded in these books. We don't like to think about our mouths being enough to condemn us before a holy God, but they are. James 3 says no man can tame the tongue, and you know that is true, even in your own life. The tongue is a world of unrighteousness, it stains us and can set our entire life on a hell-bound course. When Isaiah saw the Lord, he said; *"Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips."*

Hebrews 10:31 says: *"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."* The reason that is true is that God is infinitely holy and cannot dwell with sin. Now, if you are scoffing in this moment, you don't know God as He truly is; you aren't being honest with who you truly are; and you don't feel the magnitude of this moment of judgment that *will* come. We live in an age that has emphasized the love of God. God is love, the Scripture is clear, but God is also equally holy.

God has no second thoughts in this moment of judgment. He doesn't hesitate; He judges every one according to what is written in the books, according to the deeds of each one.

The book we are reading with this sermon series has a very helpful story and illustration. It's on pages 278-281, and it even mentions Cincinnati. I'll give you a really quick summary, but I encourage you to read it. The story is about a man who encountered a pastor while on an

airplane. The conversation gravitated toward the spiritual side of things, and the man admitted that he believed in a life beyond death and thought that most people who did their best would be okay. The pastor drew a ladder on a napkin, and told the man that the ladder represented morality and goodness. He asked the man to imagine that it was a very tall ladder and all of humanity was somewhere on the ladder. The best of people were towards the top. The pastor asked this man who he would put towards the top. His answer was Billy Graham and Mother Theresa. The pastor then shared with this man that both Mother Theresa and Billy Graham considered themselves to be sinners, unworthy of God apart from forgiveness in Christ. He asked the man to indicate where he thought he was on the ladder, and he put himself well below Billy Graham and Mother Theresa. The pastor's question was this: "How good do you have to be to be good enough for a holy God in a perfect place?" He then asked him: "Where is that line on the ladder between *good-enough* and *not-good-enough*?" The man didn't know what to say.

But this is where the gospel brings light and hope and peace! This is why the book of life is so important in this passage. You see Revelation 20:15 says that if anyone's name is *not* found in the book of life, that person is thrown into the lake of fire, which is Hell. Friends, I cannot be a good preacher and a loving pastor if I reshape the word of God to make it more palatable to the sinful heart. The Bible says that God is infinite in holiness. His perfections are beyond our ability to comprehend, which means that our sin and rebellion and selfish living, even our careless words, have an offensiveness to God that is worthy of judgment. Have I committed the sins of Hitler and Pol Pot? *No*, but I will not be compared to them and be given a pass. I will stand on my own, *my* deeds and *my* words before a Holy and Sovereign God who sits on a pure and spotless throne, and I will not bring perfection and righteousness to the throne. Nor will you.

But the gospel says that a perfection and a righteousness can be mine, and it can be yours too. It is the perfection and righteousness of Jesus Christ, the Lamb that was slain. If I confess my need for Him and trust in Him alone for salvation, I can be saved. In 2 Peter 3:9, we read: "*The Lord does not wish for any to perish, but that all should reach repentance.*" God does not wish for any to perish, but He will not, indeed, He cannot, compromise His purity and holiness. Indeed, heaven can't be heaven if He does. But, for those who repent, for those who call upon the Lord for salvation in Christ, their name is written in the book of life, and the reward will be incomprehensible.

Dwelling with God in a New and Perfect Place is Certain for all God's People

Revelation 21 gives us a glimpse of this incomprehensible reward, and this glimpse is enough to sustain us and transform us as we wait for the day. This is the second scene, and it isn't a lake of fire; it's a glorious city, prepared eagerly, and thoughtfully, and thoroughly, and joyfully, like

a bride on her wedding day. Heaven is a place of majesty, peace, and beauty. Revelation 21 and 22 tell us all things are new, that the streets are gold, the fruits on the trees are ripe, and suffering of all kinds is absent. No pain, no tears, no loss, no sickness. You won't need a hip replacement, you won't need a wheel chair, or a feeding tube. Doctors will be out of a job.

And Revelation 21:1 says that there will no longer be a sea. What does that mean? Earlier I told you that Revelation uses a great deal of symbolism: numbers and objects and such. This verse doesn't mean that water is absent. Revelation 22 speaks of the river of life. The point here is symbolic. Isaiah compared the wicked to the tossing of the sea which casts up mire and mud³; in Revelation 13 the beast rises out of the sea; in our passage, the dead come out of it. In ancient times, the sea often brought death and chaos. But danger, chaos, evil, and death will not be a part of the new heavens and the new earth. Doesn't that sound so wonderful!

But these precious realities are not the best part. Oh, they are good and sweet truths, but there is something far better. The best part is in Revelation 21:3: *"And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God.'"* This is heaven! Dwelling with God! The fellowship that Adam and Eve had with God in the garden is restored. It is the theme and end of God's story that has run through the entire Scripture. This is the fulfilled promise made to Abraham in Gen 15 and 17. This is what God sought when He called Moses to lead the people out of Egypt This is what He began to establish with the Tabernacle in the wilderness (God said this same thing in Leviticus 26). We have a sense of what this tastes like as the Holy Spirit now dwells within us, but we will only know it fully, and gloriously, in the new heavens and new earth. He will *dwell with us*; we will dwell with Him. He will be our God; we will be His people! Revelation 22:4 says we will see His face. That is heaven! This is the goal and the glory of salvation —God *with us*! It is God getting the glory He alone deserves, and it us enjoying the good that only He can provide.

This is so important and life changing. So many of us have a deficient view of heaven. We look forward to no more sickness and we can't wait to see our loved ones, but if we are honest, those longings don't actually motivate us to live very differently. In fact, those longings, if they are our deepest longings, actually reveal a very poor understanding of what heaven will be like, and a poor understanding of heaven causes us to overvalue what this world offers.

I hope that what captures you in these verses is God dwelling with His people. The prosperity, the health, the protection, those are good, but *God with us* is the ultimate good. Would you rather have the run of the palace or sit and eat with the King?

I believe John Piper helps us here. Listen to this question from his book, *God is the Gospel*:

³ Is. 57:20

“The critical question for our generation, and for every generation, is this: If you could have heaven, with no sickness, and with all the friends you ever had on earth, and all the food you ever liked, and all the leisure activities you ever enjoyed, and all the natural beauties you ever saw, all the physical pleasures you ever tasted, and no human conflict or any natural disasters, could you be satisfied with heaven if Christ was not there?”

How you answer that question opens a window into your soul, and reveals what, or who, you desire most. What is most desirable is Christ. And our God and King is what will make heaven truly heaven.

Over the years I have heard some wonder out loud if heaven will be boring. Friends, *heaven will not be boring because God is not boring*. The picture of heaven where we sit on a cloud and wear a white robe is so void of what the Bible says. And it is so uncreative. Look at the creativity of our God. Do you really think heaven will be less creative? It is going to be more creative. We will dwell with God. Sin and evil will be absent, and all the effects of sin and evil will be absent, and we will be *with* God.

God speaks of this with total certainty. He says in Revelation 21:6: “*It is done. I am the Alpha and Omega* (the first and last letter of the Greek alphabet—A-Z) *the beginning and the end.*” The point here is that nothing and no one precedes God, and nothing will replace God or come after Him. He is the origin of all things, He is the goal of all things. This scene of the new heaven and the new earth is guaranteed because God is God.

Can you believe that God offers all this to sinners? Look at the last part of Revelation 21:6, God gives to the thirsty the water of life, and these waters are free. God gives this to us. He quenches our thirst. And then in Revelation 21:7, we are called His sons. This carries the ideas of inheritance and relationship and ownership. These realities are ours, and we *feel* them and *enjoy* them in heaven in a way that we can’t even fully comprehend right now.

But these realities should motivate us to live boldly and passionately for the One who has made these things so. For the Christian, the hope and the realities of the new heaven and the new earth with our thirst-quenching King transforms everything. ***The fact that God will dwell with us in eternity changes how we dwell now.*** We spend our money in ways that benefit eternity; we live every aspect of our lives with eternity in view. Parenting becomes more meaningful. It’s not about behavior management, peanut butter sandwiches, ballgames, and college tuition, parenting is about raising our kids to be Christ-glorifying, eternally-minded lights in a world that is dark. When we live with eternity in mind, our marriage becomes more significant because it’s a living picture of Christ and the church. When we see what God is offering to all people that will repent of their sin and trust in Him to quench their thirst, we won’t see evangelism and sharing our faith as a “have-to” *burden*, we will see it as a “get-to” *gift* that we want others to have.

And this gift of dwelling with God in heaven is offered to all, all except “the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars. Their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death (v.8). These are the people who refused to repent and believe. These are the people who clung to their lies and their sin. Some will choose this path instead of God’s, thinking it is the better path, but God will bring judgment. There will be some who see how we spend our money, notice how we parent and view marriage, they will notice that we kindly interact with others, and we must tell them why.

Time on earth is short. Eternity is not. ***Life in this world is utterly serious, because what you make of God here, and how you live now, will determine how you meet God in the end, and where you will spend eternity.*** And it is worth it to live and speak for Him. ***Dwelling with God in a New and Perfect Place is Certain for all God’s People.***