

Your Afterlife as Viewed from the Cross

What happens to us after our bodies die?

People have wrestled with this for ages. Some say it's a choice between heaven (eternal paradise with Christ) or hell (eternal torture without Christ). Others say if you don't choose Christ, you simply cease to exist. Others believe everybody goes to heaven, even if it's kicking and screaming (at least, for a time). Believe it or not, *all* of these views have their roots in historical Christianity and in Scripture. But, as with any theology (= finite humans trying to make sense of an infinite God), there are problems. The hope is to aim for a perspective that is true to the Scriptures and the character of Jesus, especially as displayed on the Cross.

For the Apostle Paul, the **Cross of Christ** was of utmost importance (1 Cor. 2: 1-5). There Jesus demonstrated the true nature of God, who:

- Loves people unconditionally, even as they are actively trying to kill Him (Matt. 5: 38-48, Eph. 2: 1-10),
- Judges our sin by absorbing it into Himself and returning only love back to us (2 Cor. 5: 16-21), and transforms *retributive* justice ("eye for an eye") into *restorative* justice (walking the "second mile" with your enemy).
- Turns all our notions of power & success upside down (Is. 55: 1-13, 1 Cor. 13: 1-13).

So, at the very least, God's radical forgiveness and love for enemies negates the notion of eternal torture for those who don't accept Christ, even though many of us have trusted this idea to be Biblical.

Other views get closer to reflecting the true nature of God (*love*, 1 John 4:7-8) but still fall short: universal salvation seems to undervalue human choice and the annihilationist (you cease to exist forever by not consciously choosing Christ) seems to *overvalue* human choice, undervaluing the power of Love (which never fails).

If you are open to taking the Cross, Jesus' character, and the Scriptures seriously, I'd like to invite you to ponder a different approach:

Imagine that, after death, everybody goes into the full presence of God, a Fiery Love that consumes all our selfishness and unites us intimately with God and all of Creation!

Everybody gets in?? Yep. There's no other "place" to go! (Ps. 139:7-12, Is. 6:3, Hab. 3:3, Eph. 4:9-10). But there's a catch. Not everyone *experiences* it as "heaven". For some, it's "hell". *How can that be?*

The Bible makes clear that our choices form attitudes and attitudes form our experiences of life. Two people can touch God's Unchanging Love and react to it very differently. For example, person A is surrendered to letting God mold and shape her life, trusting God's goodness. For her, the goal is to let God dissolve away any selfishness. So stepping into the fire of God's passionate love is "heaven". Person B has lived their life for themselves. They see their life as isolated and competitive toward others. Their world revolves around using people to meet their needs. Love is repugnant and weak. So, being thrust into the lap of Perfect Love is experienced as a tortuous "fire". Same God. Same fiery love. Different experiences.

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The Good News is that, just like in our earthly life, God's love never gives up on us. Even in our worst self-centered moments, God continues to draw us to Himself. Why wouldn't that continue into the afterlife? So, those experiencing "hell" would be subject to the continuous and liberating love of Jesus, gradually wearing away the stubborn self-destructive attitudes which imprison them. Eventually, the walls would come a-tumbling down. But, again, that process is up to the willingness of the person. Choice is important. I'd like to hope that everyone eventually surrenders their heart to Perfect Love which casts out all fear. But I really don't know. However, God's not the "bad guy" in this. And, really, neither is the person imprisoned by their own misguided world-view. It's just that choices still have consequences, even in the Next Realm.

And, there you have it. What do you think? What makes more sense to you? Be a Truth Seeker! Don't settle for the standard line but investigate for yourself. Let's learn from each other. Blessings!



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FOR FURTHER REFLECTION...

- Heaven as *Kingdom of God*: A New Reality Now
 - Parables: joyful surprise & growth in Mk. 4
 - 1 Cor. 15: 20-28 Old Adamic order is replaced beg. with Christ's resurrection.
- Hell as decay and death: *Gehenna* (city dump) & *hades* (underworld) (each 10x in NT, mostly in Matthew; Zero in John's Gospel.)
- The Cross as Relentless Love and Co-suffering by the One who fills the universe (1 Cor. 1: 18-25, Jer. 23:24, Hab. 3:3)
- Ps. 18: 25-28; Mt. 21: 42-44: *different experiences of the same God.*
- 1 Cor. 3: 10-15, Mt. 3: 11-12 (also: burning bush, Pentecost, etc.) **FIRE** as a primary metaphor for God's Presence and Passion.
- *Prayer* for a better theology (Rom. 12: 1-2)

Understanding the Wrath of God by Rev. Scott Danforth (Teaching brief: <http://lighthousechurchdrummondisland.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Understanding-the-Wrath-of-God.pdf>)

Raising Hell by Julie Fererda (book available on Amazon)

Hell No! Article Series by Fr. Richard Rohr (<https://cac.org/daily-meditations/hell-no-weekly-summary-2021-09-18/>)

The Case for Annihilationism Article by Dr. Greg Boyd (<https://reknew.org/2008/01/the-case-for-annihilationism/>)