

WEEK 4: WHAT TO MAKE OF IT ALL?

We started this series four weeks ago – well, actually, I started it over a year ago – trying to answer the question of whether the Australian rugby player Israel Folau was right in what he said in an infamous Instagram post which subsequently cost him his job: is it true that unrepentant “Drunks, Homosexuals, Adulterers, Liars, Fornicators, Thieves, Atheists [and] Idolaters” are all destined for Hell?

That initial question then gave way to a whole series of related questions: what is Hell? And what is its counterpart, that we habitually call Heaven? Are these literal, physical places or spaces – or do they occupy other dimensions? Is there any justification for our belief that one is up above us, and the other is down below? Are they the only two places that we can go when we die? And what is it exactly that happens to us when we die? Do we go directly to one of these places – or are there any interim steps? What is it that determines where we go? Is it what we do during our lifetime? Or what we believe? And do we ever get the chance to change the decision – and if so, when?

For the last three weeks we have combed the Bible for evidence which can provide the answers to these questions. First we looked in the Old Testament: we looked at the ways that the deaths of the patriarchs are described; we looked at the stories told about the prophets, and their activities during and after their lifetimes; we looked at the language that the poets used, their vocabulary and phraseology, the themes they explored, and what these tell us about their belief systems; and we looked at prophecy, and what it implies about the destiny of the world and the peoples within it.

In Week 2 we looked at the Gospels, to see what Jesus said, and what we can infer from this. We looked at his words from the cross, and what they suggest about where he believed he was going after he died. We looked at his promises to his disciples as to how their faith and good deeds might be rewarded. We looked at the warnings he issued to the Pharisees and others who crossed his path, as to where their lack of faith and misdeeds might end up. We looked at the parables he told, to gain some understanding of the belief systems at play within his audience. And we looked at his prophecies of the end times, to see what they say about our ultimate fate.

And then last week we looked elsewhere in the New Testament to see what other hints we might find to round out the picture. We looked at the early church’s developing beliefs about Heaven and Hell, and the different spaces and activities that they respectively comprise. We looked at various attempts to define what constitutes goodness and what constitutes evil, as the things that were considered to determine whether we go one way or the other. We looked at how exclusive or inclusive Heaven might be: specifically, whether everyone will go to Heaven – and how this might come about – or just an elite handful. And finally we looked at beliefs regarding the resurrection, how this will occur, and what it will mean for individuals and their bodies.

All in all, we’ve covered quite a lot of ground over the past three weeks – and we could have covered much more, if we had had more time. There are lots of writings that – rightly or wrongly – we haven’t explored, lots of doctrines that we haven’t dissected, lots of stories that we haven’t told. We’ve only scratched the surface of the book of Revelation; we haven’t gone into the teachings of Augustine in any detail, and Thomas Aquinas not at all; we haven’t talked about the harrowing of Hell, limbo, or the Rapture, to mention but a few. We haven’t fully investigated the influence of other cultures, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek religion and philosophy, in the way that we might have done.

So, and notwithstanding these caveats, from what we have looked at, what can we say? What have we discovered? Mainly that, as the distinguished theologian Karen Armstrong says: “Scripture has never yielded clear, unequivocal messages or lucid incontrovertible doctrines.” And, true to this, we

have found an evolving, constantly developing picture with new elements being added all the time, and one which shows no particular consensus or unanimity. Let's try to pull it all together ...

Initially in the Hebrew tradition, we find that life has just two components: a body made from the dust of the earth, and the breath of life, "nefesh". Death represents the separation of these two components – the return of the "nefesh" to its creator, God; and the decomposition of the body to dust. After which there is nothing but the memory of the man and his deeds, the family that he has assembled and sired, and the wealth and property that he has amassed. All this within a belief system which suggests that a good life well lived will beget a fine reputation, a large family, and substantial wealth; and a wicked life will beget the opposite – ill fame, no descendants to perpetuate the family name, little in the way of material possessions.

Thereafter there is a steadily developing picture of revelation. This starts with an emerging focus on the physical place where the dead body is lain, the process of committing the body to a hole in the ground wherein it will return to dust. This is both literal and metaphorical: the hole becomes recognised for this purpose, as a grave, and the grave becomes recognised as the state of death and decay. Then all the graves collectively become recognised as a domain, a realm of the dead below the ground – and that realm is given a name, which is Sheol, which also comes to serve as a metaphor for the death that all living beings must suffer.

Then there is a sense that what enters Sheol is not just a body, but something different and additional, separate and independent, something that lingers after death – "refalm", an empty shade which represents the person that was, but is without substance or meaningful consciousness.

Then, as time goes on, there is an increasing number of questions that are begged by this scenario, and the legends and worked experiences which are relayed around it:

- Stories are told about people coming back from the dead: for example, Samuel through the séance staged by the Witch of Endor, and the three corpses which are reanimated by Elijah and Elisha. And so people start to ask, does that mean we all have this potential? Can we all come back from Sheol, if God wills it?
- Tradition also has it that God allowed people such as Enoch and Elijah to avoid Sheol altogether – and so people ask, where was it that these two actually went? Was it into the Shamayim, the place where God lives? Or was it elsewhere? What was it that persuaded God to allow this? Could we do it too, if we are as good and faithful as they were?

Then history intervenes, and it becomes increasingly apparent to the Jewish people that the belief system they lived their lives by is not playing out – the one that said good people get their rewards during their lifetime, and bad people suffer. On a national level, the invasion by foreign powers, the fall of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, the destruction of the temple, the exile of the people: these all punish the good Jews along with the wicked ones. And so new questions begin to be asked: when is it that the good will receive their rewards? And when and how will the ones who have done these terrible things to us receive their punishment?

In the first instance, the answer is found within the existing cosmology. Sheol becomes stratified and develops a second level: Abbadon, a place where the "refalm" of the wicked go to be utterly destroyed, while the "refalm" of the good linger on.

But then, as history bites harder and harder and the plight of the Jewish people worsens, the revelation gathers pace and volume, and the answers become bigger and more corporate. There develops a wider and conjoined sense:

- First, that the faith of God’s people will be recognised, if not before their death, then afterwards. Hence the sense in the book of Ezekiel that the circumcised dead have access to Sheol, while the uncircumcised dead remain outside of it
- Second, that God will return to raise His people and reward their faithfulness, if not in life, then at some point in the future after their death – as set out in the prophecies of Isaiah and Hosea

Then, in Daniel 12, a more advanced narrative emerges which sets a long-term timeframe for these things to come to pass. This comes in the form of a distinctive eschatology which includes a judgement to be made to determine those who will be rewarded by God, as opposed to those who will not. Through this, the reward moves from being something which is material and in the here-and-now, to one which lies in the future, at the end of time: eternal life, as opposed to the shame and everlasting contempt that will be suffered by those who miss out. The basis on which the judgement will be made is spiritual: if you are wise, and lead others to righteousness, you will make the cut. If not, then you won’t.

Around this point, at the end of the books which we recognise as the Old Testament, and the Jewish people know as the Tanakh, it becomes more difficult to track the path of the revelation. Daniel’s narrative is briefly and concisely expressed, and begs a number of questions – and so thereafter we see more and more attempts made to answer those questions. Collectively, these ideas and the writings in which they are set comprise a considerable amount of noise within which we need to try to identify the signal. This on both an individual level, in terms of what is implied for ourselves and our loved ones; and on a wider, collective level, for God’s people and those among whom they live.

That said, we can say with some certainty that belief in the core statements of Daniel 12 pertains throughout this period – and so the answer to the question of what happens to us when we die becomes inextricably linked to questions of the end times and the resurrection, and what will happen then. It seems safe to say this from the validation provided in Matthew’s Gospel, in chapter 24-25 which is the longest exposition of eschatology that Jesus offers; and from more passing references such as Luke 20.34ff, which discussed the state of marriage in the aftermath of the resurrection; and John 5.25-30, which talks of a time which *“is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live ... a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out – those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.”*

While Daniel’s core narrative can be considered secure, then, the judgement that forms part of it gives rise to any amount of conjecture – that is to say, the separation of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, some to eternal life, others to eternal punishment. The questions associated with this are many and various, including:

- What does it mean (metaphorically speaking) to be a sheep? What are the thoughts and/or deeds which qualify us for eternal life, as opposed to its opposite?
- If we do qualify for eternal life, where will it be? Will it be in the Shamayim of the Old Testament, the heavens where God lives? If so, what do these look like? What is their topography? If not, then where?
- And what will eternal life be like? What will be the rewards that were promised in the Old Testament? What will we be able to say and do? What kind of bodies will we have: will they be based on the ones we have now? What if they are currently imperfect? What if they are destroyed at the moment of death? If they are different, will we be able to recognise the people we know and love?

- Conversely, what does it mean to be a goat? What are the thoughts and/or misdeeds which will lead to us missing out on eternal life, and condemn us instead to eternal punishment? Are they major, significant crimes such as robbery or murder? Or do they include minor misbehaviours, such as white lies or inappropriate thoughts?
- If we do suffer this condemnation, where do we go? And how will the punishment play out? What will be its details – the torments that we suffer, the pains that we bear: how will these be delivered, and by whom?
- And what about the period between our death, and the resurrection taking place? What happens here? Do we simply go into a kind of sleep, to be awakened at the time of the resurrection? Or is there a kind of initial, interim judgement – one which decides whether we can wait or sleep in peace and comfort, or we are kept in discomfort ahead of the final judgement?
- Does this period represent a second chance for us? Could we have the opportunity after death, and before the final judgement, to give ourselves a better chance of being a sheep? Could this be a time when we hear the voice of God, and respond to it, when we didn't do so during our lifetime? Could it be a time when we are cleansed or purged of our sins, to make us more ready for the final judgement?
- How does all this reflect on the previous doctrine of Sheol, the place where the Old Testament tells us that all the dead go? When we thought that it was a neutral place where the dead merely exist without form or substance, did we misread it? Is it a place with different areas, into which different classes of people are assigned? Is its topography shaped by the needs to reward some people, and begin punishing others?

The diversity of these questions is matched by the variety of answers that we find both within the New Testament and in the range of unauthorised literature which was in circulation around the early church. For example, on the matter of the thoughts and/or deeds which qualify us for eternal life, Luke and John's Gospels imply quite strongly that it is simply a belief that Jesus is who he says he is. However, Matthew emphasises the keeping of Jewish law and Jesus's commandments as a prerequisite – that is, what we do, in addition to what we believe.

Paul's letters take this on a stage, as several include lengthy lists of the behaviours and lifestyles which are to be avoided. Meanwhile, popular works which were subsequently deemed non-canonical, such as the Didache, go even further in defining what constitutes good, acceptable, sheep-like behaviour, by contrast with the roster of misbehaviours which will inevitably lead to the goat-pen. We will no doubt also be familiar with the attempts of James, the brother of Jesus, to reconcile the positions in his eponymous letter, where he argues that what we believe will beget the kind of deeds that are acceptable to God – and therefore there is, or should be, no real inconsistency between our faith and our works.

Meanwhile, the imagination of early-church writers regarding the respective destinations of the dead is more or less unfettered. The Gospel-writers give them little detail to work with: Luke talks of Paradise, the Garden of Eden, as the place where Jesus knows he is headed, while John speaks of the many rooms in the Father's house; and Matthew makes frequent mention of the fire of Gehenna, and the wailing and gnashing of teeth to be heard there. But these few details bear copious fruit in the minds of the authors of the Apocalypses of Paul and Peter, the Acts of Thomas and the like. And it is here, rather than in the authorised books of the New Testament, that we find the landscapes that we might commonly associate with Heaven and Hell:

- Heaven as a bright place shining with silver and gold, with rivers flowing with milk and honey and orchards abundant with fruit, where the souls of the righteous mingle with the patriarchs

and the faithful whose stories are told in the Old Testament, and where hymns are sung and praises given constantly to God, both day and night

- By contrast, Hell as an unlit place, overseen by dark angels whose role is to inflict all manner of tortures and punishments on the wicked, where there are rivers of fire, boiling tar and sulphur, steep cliffs, deep pits filled with ravenous worms, snow and icy wastes, all of which are put to use in the service of the tormentors

It is in these writings that the boundaries start to become blurred between what happens to us at the moment of death, and what subsequently happens at the resurrection and the final judgement. In the book of Enoch, there is some clarity – that the dead go first to Sheol to await the final judgement; and it is in Sheol that the separation between good and evil first begins to be made. But later writers appear to be in indecent haste to get to their depictions of the eternal life and eternal punishment that is supposed to take place after the resurrection – and this results in the detail of these often being presented not as the consequences of the final judgement, but as a precursor to it, or synchronistic with it.

What we can also discern in these early writings is a division already emerging between conservatives and liberals. Between those on the one hand who would set the bar high, demand a rigorous standard of holiness and purity, and present Paradise as the exclusive preserve of a few, select individuals who were predestined for this outcome. And those on the other hand who believed that a more inclusive doctrine of the afterlife was befitting of the Jesus whom they knew or knew of, and of the God whom they saw as merciful, compassionate and loving of all His people, regardless of how that was reciprocated. That Paul's letters are used as evidence in support of both positions probably tells you as much as you need to know about the state of the contemporary debate.

Behind all this lies the issue of the canonicity of the various writings – that is, which ones can be considered to have authority, and which ones are (in the words of the church historian Eusebius) spurious, absurd and Godless. Remember, there was no orthodoxy in Christianity for some 300 or 400 years after Jesus's death: this leaves a gap of as many as 600 years in which different ideas could multiply and ferment after the Old Testament leaves off, and before an attempt was made to sift them and determine what was acceptable, and what was less so. It wasn't until the Synod of Hippo in 393 AD that a canon of credible texts was approved which approximates our current Bible. But there were other, disputed canons earlier than this, e.g., the Muratorian canon in the late 2nd century, and the canons of Origen in the early 3rd century, and of Athanasius in the 4th century.

Each of these canons can be found weighing the merits of different works that included different ideas about the afterlife. The Muratorian canon, for example, gave authority to the Apocalypse of Peter, which included the graphic details of Hell that we discussed in last week's talk. Meanwhile, Eusebius was not at all persuaded that the Apocalypse of John, which we know as the book of Revelation, should be recognised as authentic. Again, this shows how fluid the belief system was within the early church, with regard to the key questions of the afterlife – and how difficult it is for us now to determine what we should believe.

So, as we move towards the end of this enquiry, what conclusions should we be drawing? Where is the signal among all of this noise? In response to the challenge that we accepted at the start of this series, what should we believe about the afterlife?

It's perhaps easiest to start with what we can discount from our thesis. There are two or three things that are popularly believed or stated about the afterlife, of which we have not seen any evidence among the materials that we have considered. And so we can say with some confidence that these should have no place in our cosmology. They include the following:

1. The belief that, when we die, we become angels. None of the books we have looked at, canonical or non-canonical, allow for this. Angels are presented instead as a different category of creatures who serve as courtiers and messengers of God from the earliest books of the Bible onwards. They have characteristics and capabilities which are entirely distinct from any sense of humanity, either past, present or future – and so this belief can be rejected quickly and out of hand (see Paula Gooder’s excellent book, *Heaven*)
2. The belief that Hell is the domain of the Devil, Satan, the place where he lives and rules over demons, and has power and authority to torment the souls of the wicked. Again, there is no evidence in either the Old or New Testament, or the writings of the early church, to suggest this. Insofar as there is a consistent picture of Hell (and we’ll come to this in a moment), it is a place to which Satan himself is condemned to be kept, a prison from which he cannot escape, and in which he is ultimately destroyed. By contrast, in those writings which deal with the punishment of sinners in the afterlife, we actually find that it is angels who do the torturing, not demons: in the Apocalypse of Peter it is Ezrael, the angel of wrath, while in the Apocalypse of Paul it is a troop of angels called the Tartaruchi who fulfil this responsibility, with some obvious relish

I was tempted to add to this list of things that we don’t see in the Bible “a consistent picture of Hell”. Because, in truth, we do not. Instead, as we noted in Week 1, we see the word “Hell” used to describe no fewer than four different concepts, each of which has a discrete set of meanings and cultural associations:

1. Sheol – the domain of the dead to which all living things are destined to go, almost without exception, where they continue to exist as shades or “refalm”
2. Hades – in simple terms the Greek word which is used to translate the word Sheol from the Old Testament Hebrew, but which brings its own connotations from classical literature of an underworld with its own characteristics and its own ruling god
3. Gehenna – a real place in space and time, the valley outside Jerusalem where child sacrifices were made to the pagan god Molech, and which gave birth to a folk memory of a place of fire and horror
4. Tartarus – mentioned in 2 Peter as a place where God imprisoned rebellious angels, this is again a borrowing from Greek poetry and mythology: Tartarus was the deep abyss below Hades where Zeus imprisoned the Titans after they rebelled against the gods of Olympus

The sweeping-together of these four very different worlds into a single concept of Hell – itself a word which is, as we have previously noted, borrowed from Norse mythology – is a relatively modern phenomenon, one which dates from the King James Bible onwards. The blurring of the boundaries between these worlds not only reminds us of the process that we have commented on just now, wherein the dark parts of Sheol in the book of Enoch are merged into the place of eternal punishment which we are told will come into play for the “goats” after the resurrection and final judgement. But it also casts very significant doubt – for me at least – around the whole idea of Hell. After all, if it means as many as four very different and contrasting things, can it actually be held to mean anything definitive at all?

If Hell cannot be satisfactorily defined, then, should we reject the idea of it altogether? There are plenty of those who would: we have previously considered the original universalists, the likes of Clement of Alexandria and Origen, who believed that all will be saved, and that to think otherwise is to undermine the power of God’s love and omnipotence. Modern liberal writers such as Rob Bell and Steve Chalke have restated these beliefs, based on their understanding of a loving and compassionate

God who has said that He wants to restore all things – all things – to Himself. Chalke in particular has said this:

“Astonishing numbers of people have been taught that while only those who are Christians – and even the right kind of ‘born again’ Christians – will be ‘saved’ and ‘go to heaven’, the rest of humanity will spend eternity in torment and punishment in God’s torture chamber of hell. More than that, they have also been told that this is simply ‘what the Bible teaches’; a central truth of the Christian faith to reject which amounts to heresy.

“I am convinced of two things: first, this is not what the Bible teaches. Second, this depressing, deadly and misguided notion has left our culture deaf to the real heart of Jesus’s teaching; that of love, forgiveness and the path to well-being and hope. The very message that our society and world so desperately longs to hear.”

Meanwhile, the American philosopher Thomas Talbott has said that belief in the idea of eternal Hell, or that some souls will be destroyed, requires us either to reject the idea that it is God's wish and desire to save all beings; or to accept the idea that God wants to, but will not "successfully accomplish his will and satisfy his own desire in this matter." In other words, belief in Hell means that what we read in Paul’s letters about the salvation and restoration of all things has to be wrong.

I am to a large extent persuaded by these arguments. I also cannot equate the loving, patient, compassionate, forgiving, merciful, healing, life-giving, self-sacrificial Jesus that we see in the Gospels – the Jesus who sees value in every human life, however humble, disadvantaged, misguided or broken – the Jesus in whom we are supposed to see the perfect reflection of God – the God who is unchanging, the same yesterday, today and forever: I cannot equate that picture with one which portrays a God who would summarily condemn individuals to an eternity of punishment, with no further opportunity for redemption. The contrast is too stark, and the contradictions too many.

At the same time, however, I feel the need to reconcile this position with the words of Jesus, and his intimation that there is a place where we may end up finding ourselves if we persist in deeds and behaviours which are the opposite of loving. We have previously discussed that Jesus gave this place a name, Gehenna, which was supposed to remind his audience of the horrors of the time when the valley of the same name was used by the ancients for child sacrifice by fire. The fact that Jesus is recorded as talking about Gehenna by three of the four Gospel writers – and that the word subsequently also appears in the writing of his brother, James – means that we have to take it seriously.

Logically, I can create an argument for such a place, such a concept, to exist. If God’s Kingdom is a place where He is fully present; where love, peace, goodness, mercy, compassion, forgiveness and healing are all in evidence – where the characteristics of God Himself are manifested in the society He assembles – then it makes sense for there to be an opposite to this: a place where God is not present, and so His characteristics are similarly absent. A place where all of those positives are replaced by their equal and opposite negatives: where what would be white in God’s Kingdom is black; where what would be loving is hateful; where what would be kind is cruel, and so on.

If God is compassionate, forgiving and merciful – and I believe that He is – then He would never purposely condemn me to such a place. If He did, then He could not be considered to be forgiving or merciful: He would be acting out of character, which He cannot by nature do. However, at the same time, He is loving – and a manifestation of His love is that He gives me free will to do as I please. He does not seek to control me as a puppet, as He has the power to do: instead, He loves me in a way which allows me to make my own choices, in the hope that these will lead me to Him and His Kingdom, instead of to the opposite.

In this construct, I can choose my actions and behaviours, but in the knowledge that there will be consequences. If my choices recognise God's call through Jesus to be loving towards Him and all those around me, then I gravitate towards His Kingdom: I put myself in a place where God and His characteristics have primacy, and I make myself a partner in the building and maintenance of that Kingdom. However, if my choices are contrary – if I decide to use my free will to do things which are the opposite of loving, which are wicked or hateful or cruel – then I move away from God and put myself in a place where He is not. I move from light to darkness, from joy to weeping, from peace to anguish.

These are not original thoughts by any means. The idea that evil is not a force in itself, but instead a withdrawal from goodness occasioned by the exercise of free will, is one which can be found as long ago as the third century AD, in the works of Origen. The extension of this idea is that it is human beings who bring punishment on themselves through the choices they make – and this punishment is what lies at the heart of the concept of Gehenna. When we make our choices, we realise their consequences; and the consequence of doing things which are the opposite of loving is to end up in a place where there is no love. Not only is there no love, there is the opposite of love – at least one definition of which might be punishment.

Gehenna, then, is a place of our own making. It is a place where our choices take us, an uncomfortable place from which God is absent, where the polar opposite of loving your neighbour as yourself finds free expression. I think this is the idea that Jesus was trying to convey when he invoked the memory of that valley of horrors, and spoke of a place of darkness, torment, and a wailing and gnashing of teeth.

If we view Gehenna – Hell, if you must – in this way, then God's role is to seek to save us from it, a role which is entirely consistent with His nature. This He does through His call to us to do two simple things: first, to know and to love Him; and second, to love our neighbours as Jesus would love them, and as we would love ourselves. Simple, but demanding at the same time. But we should do these things safe in the knowledge that God isn't trying to trip us up in any way, or find fault in us. Again, if His nature is to be loving, compassionate, forgiving and merciful, then He cannot be otherwise – and so the dire warnings of the early church that the path towards Heaven is so narrow almost to be unnavigable can be bypassed.

What does this line of thought mean for us when we die? I think what we have read in the Bible tells us several things – again, notwithstanding the advice of Karen Armstrong that we should not look to the Scriptures for clear and distinct ideas or incontrovertible doctrines; instead, their role is “regarded as an ‘indication’ that [can] only point to the ineffable.” What the Bible indicates to us, then, I think, is as follows:

- There will be a resurrection of the dead. Daniel first gave the idea full expression, Jesus gave it substantial and detailed validation in Matthew 24-25, and Paul stated that it should be viewed as a fundamental tenet of the Christian faith – without which, everything else falls apart, including and especially the idea that Jesus himself was raised from the dead
- The resurrection leads to eternal life – and the key to this is faith that Jesus is who he says he is, and that God is who He says He is. A thing that sounds simple and straightforward, but which – as we Christians know – has colossal implications. This truth is repeated throughout John's Gospel: in 3.36 Jesus says, “*whoever believes in the Son has eternal life*”; in 5.24 he says, “*I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes in him who sent me has eternal life*”; in 11:25 he says, “*He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die*”; and so on. Meanwhile, in Luke 23:39ff we find the criminal on

the cross next to Jesus being told that he too will come into eternal life, simply for recognising who Jesus is

- At the same time, according to John 5:29, eternal life is on offer to those who have done good, τὰ ἀγαθὰ, howsoever this is defined – to use a good legal phrase. While we have looked previously at several attempts to narrow the definition of τὰ ἀγαθὰ, what we have just now said about the loving and forgiving nature of God implies that, instead, the definition should be broad enough to encompass anyone and anything that can be categorised as loving towards a neighbour
- Eternal life is not in the Heaven of our popular understanding – nor is it in the Hebrew Shamayim, where God alone resides. Instead, it is in Paradise: according to Luke 23:43, Jesus said so on the cross when he told the criminal next to him that they would both be there on that same day. Paradise should be read as indicating the Garden of Eden – and so it refers to the completion of the Kingdom of God, and the restoration of all things to their original state that will take place on the day of resurrection. Our passing into eternal life, then, takes us straight into this restored Eden
- The timeframe within which all this takes place is uncertain. We can if we wish carry forward the Old Testament reading of Sheol as a place to which the dead go to sleep for the interim period – and from which they are awakened at the time of the resurrection, as Daniel 12 and John 5:28-29 imply. Or we can consider that progress from the moment of death into eternal life is instantaneous, as is implied by Luke 23:43 (“*today you will be with me in Paradise*”) and John 5:25 (“*a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live*”). The latter reading would be helped, I think, if we contemplate the possibility of the afterlife being conducted in a dimension which sits outside of the constraints of time as we know it – although that’s an idea which probably needs either a BRICK course or a PhD in physics to explore in full ...

This cosmology leaves us needing to fit our idea of Gehenna into it, in order that it might be complete. To do this, we need to look in detail at the gospels of both Matthew and John, to examine exactly what is said about the process through which condemnation into Gehenna comes about. In Matthew’s gospel, in chapter 25:31-33, it is noticeable that Matthew makes no mention of judgement. Although there is a sifting, a sorting, a separation of souls involved here, the words that Matthew uses are agricultural. They relate to the creation of separate areas or pens through the use of boundary stones, into which the sheep and the goats will respectively be herded. The passage is therefore steeped in metaphor, as the shepherd guides his flock towards one pen, and the herd towards another.

For his part, in chapter 5:28-29 John states that the resurrection will be a time when the dead hear the voice of God and are raised; and for those who have done the opposite of good, this will be a time of judgement. The actual phraseology that John uses is that wrong-doers are brought forth (ἐκπορεύονται) into a “resurrection of judgement” (εἰς ἀνάστασιν κρίσεως) as opposed to the “resurrection of life” (εἰς ἀνάστασιν ζωῆς) which the doers of good will experience. The Greek word that John uses for judgement in 5:29 is κρίσις, from which we get our word “crisis”. It is regularly and popularly translated in the sense of a judgement made by a court of law – and it is true that it can mean that. But it also has a more nuanced range of meaning which extends across all judgements, all decision-making in any context.

Chapter 5 verse 22 states that God Himself judges no one, but has entrusted all the responsibility of judgement to Jesus. Verse 30 then implies that Jesus is to be present at the resurrection as a judge – but that his judgements are fair, as he is bound to deliver the will of the one who sent him, that is, his Father. However, we need also to consider John 12:44-50, where Jesus qualifies that remark: he says

that he hasn't come to judge the world at all, but to save it. Insofar as there is judging to be done, it is through the words that Jesus has spoken – the words that God has given him. It is the word, ὁ λόγος, which delivers the judgement on the final day – the word that Jesus spoke, the word that God gave him to speak.

So how should we read this? I think there is room within these passages for an interpretation which sees the judgement, the decision-making on the day of the resurrection belonging to the wrong-doer as much as it does to Jesus. Jesus and the words that he spoke during his time on earth stand as the representatives of God, and the characteristics of the Kingdom, almost as a template against which the wrong-doer may assess himself, his values and his conduct. But the decision then belongs to the wrong-doer: does he choose to abandon his wrong-doing, his rejection of the Kingdom life of peace and love that Jesus preached, and decide now to go all-in with Jesus? Or does he stubbornly refuse to accept the witness of Jesus and, instead, decide to remain where he is, without God, in a place where God's characteristics are absent?

If he chooses the latter, then the condemnation implicit in this passage belongs to the wrong-doer himself – in the same way that we might describe someone as being condemned by their actions. However, we might also say that Jesus has condemned the wrong-doer, on the basis that he has held a mirror up to their values, behaviours and actions, and this has found them to be wanting in comparison with the loving characteristics of God's Kingdom. In this, as John confirms, Jesus is acting justly because, as God's representative, he cannot do otherwise – for justice is one of the characteristics of the Kingdom.

There is then the question as to whether this represents a once-and-for-all decision, from which there is no way back. Here, I think, is where the words that John writes in 5:30 about Jesus acting justly and doing the will of his Father are most significant. The words are in the present tense, which in Greek is synonymous with the present continuous tense: it means, I do this, and I am doing this, both at the same time. What this allows us to say is this: that Jesus is continuously involved in this process of judgement, he is continuously acting justly, and he is continuously serving the will of his Father. Within all of the possible timeframes in which the resurrection takes place – past, present and future.

Therefore, since his Father's will is loving, compassionate, forgiving and merciful, we might reasonably also say this: when confronted with a wrong-doer who does not choose to return to God, Jesus is continuously offering them the opportunity to do so. We know from John chapter 12 that Jesus has come to save, rather than to judge or to condemn. We know that he does and is doing this now, within our lifetimes, from our experience of him as living Christians. We know it is in line with his nature, which is like his Father's, forgiving and merciful; and it is in pursuit of his Father's wishes, which are summarised in Acts 3:21 and 1 Cor 15:26-28, and which are to restore everything under God. Is it therefore unreasonable to suggest that he does and continues to do this after our death, and in all possible timeframes?

As they say on the BBC, other products are available. If we have learned nothing else from our trawl of the Scriptures, and of the literature which emanated from them, it is that there is a multitude of possible belief systems and variants when it comes to determining what happens to us after we die. What I've tried to do tonight to draw my own conclusions from the evidence that we have considered over the past four weeks. It's entirely possible that you might look at the same evidence, give weight to factors other than the ones I have emphasised, and draw completely different conclusions of your own. And that is your prerogative: God's church is a broad one, and that is one of its strengths.

What I hope we have done is address if not answer some of the questions that we started with. We've looked extensively at the concepts that we call Hell, and those that we call Heaven. We've explored

whether one is up above us, and the other is down below. We've examined the processes that happen to us when we die, which bits of us linger on, and which bits go where. We've looked at all the possible places that the Scriptures suggest we might go when we die – and whether we go directly or indirectly to one of these places. We've tried to identify what it is that determines where we go – our thoughts, our deeds, both or neither. And, latterly, we've considered whether we ever get the chance to change the decision – and if so, when.

While you may not agree with the place where we've ended up, I hope that the last four weeks have been enjoyable and informative in equal measure. I also hope and pray that they have been helpful to you as you consider your own faith, your own cosmology, and your understanding of what happens to us when we die. Thank you for taking the journey with me. [ENDS]

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