

Surprised By Hope

I. Introduction

A. Today, I'm beginning a new series on Heaven: As you'll note, I've entitled this series "**Surprised By Hope**" (Which is the title of one of the books I read in preparation for this series)... **I know this:** That taking the time to look into all of this-- **Has helped** me Tie-up a lot of loose ends that I have had→ **Regarding** what happens when it comes to what the Scriptures actually says about the next life... **& Yes:** I met a few Surprises along the way... **& Yes,** it has made a Difference to me-- **& I hope** (by the time we complete this series)→ **It** makes a difference to you as well

B. Back in January 2000, leaders of the city of Charlotte, NC: Invited their favorite son, **Dr. Billy Graham**, to a luncheon in his honor... **Dr. Graham** initially declined the invitation→ **B/C** of his struggle with Parkinson's Disease... **But when they** told him that they didn't want him to give a long talk→ **But** come simply to be honored & make a few simple remarks-- **Dr. Graham** then agreed to come... **At the Luncheon:** (After they made some remarks honoring him) **He stood** to share some brief thought with them→ **Where** he told them of a story regarding **Dr. Albert Einstein** (Who had recently been named Times Magazine's "Man of the Century")... **Some years earlier:** **Dr. Einstein** had boarded a train in Princeton, NJ... **& As** the train pulled out→ **The Conductor** began making his rounds through the car to punch the tickets of the passengers... **When** he got to the great scientist-- **Dr. Einstein** reached into his pocket of his vest→ **But** he couldn't find his ticket... **& after a thorough search, the conductor finally said:** "Look Dr. Einstein it's OK....**I/We** all know who you are....**& I'm** sure you bought a ticket....**So,** don't worry about it"... **But As the Conductor went on down the row punching tickets of the other passengers:** **The Conductor** happened to look back→ **&** Noticed that Dr. Einstein was down on his hands-&-knees looking under his seat... **& So,** the conductor rushed back saying→ "**Dr. Einstein,** really, it's OK....**We** know who you are....**We're** sure you bought a ticket....**It's** OK"... **At that Dr. Einstein stood up:** (&

said) “**Young man**, I, too, know who I am→ **What** I don’t know is where I’m going”...

II. There are Three Great Questions in life: Where did I come from? / Why am I here? / & Where am I going?...

A. Now, if I take a Naturalist view of life (i.e. all there is this physical world / Secularism): Then the answer to the first question is this – You & I are in essence Sophisticated Animals originating from primordial soup / Nothing but a Complex Germ that evolved over billions of years... **& If you accept that conclusion:** It leads to some disturbing Implications about the realities of the next two questions... (i.e.) If that is indeed our origin→ Then you possess no Intrinsic purpose other than to survive / & In regards to the next question-- When you die→ You simply are Annihilation Extinction ...

You might remember the popular sitcom back in the 1990’s called Murphy Brown: It was about a wise-cracking journalist→ Played by lead-actress Candice Bergen... Well, late in the series, **Murphy Brown has a baby:** & In one of the episodes she began to wonder→ “If my baby asks me what happens when you die→ *What will I say?*”... **She had asked that question of her father when she was a child:** (& Her father had told her) “When you pull the plug on the refrigerator→ *Does it still keep running?*”... **& So**, she thought that when a person died→ **That** the Goodwill truck came & got you... **& So, in this particular episode she went around asking her associates**→ “What happens when you die”: **& So** she asked her philandering colleague **Frank:** & His answer depended on who he was dating at the time→ (i.e.) Depending on whether she was a Buddhist / Hindu / or Rastafarian... **& Then she asked Miles** (her Director who was Jewish): (& he responded) “Well we don’t really think about that→ *We just concentrate on the here-&-now*”... **Completely dissatisfied by the end of the episode**→ **She goes home:** Where we encounter the philosophy-dispensing house painter named **Eldin** (Who seemed always to be at her house)... **& So**, she asked Eldin→ (& Eldin said) “I do believe in Immortality→ *In that we live on in what we create....For me it’s the art found in the projects I do....& Maybe* you have something like that to fall back on?”... **& This** seemed to

totally satisfy Murphy Brown's quest... **& There** the episode ends→ **& There's** Hollywood's answer... **& We should want to leap off the couch:** (& say) "**Wait a minute**, that's not good enough!....**That's** the best you can give me?!→ **Simply** the Remnants of my work that I've left behind?....**That's** not enough!"...

B. As I understand Anthropologists have yet to find a single culture→ That has not believed in some form of

Afterlife: **It might** be called Nirvana or the Happy Hunting Ground-- **But there's** something in the human spirit that refuses to believe→ "**I'm** just a candle to be snuffed out / Rot / & Recycle"... **& There's a reason we all possess this "incurable religiosity":** (B/C as we're told in Ecclesiastes) **God** has placed Eternity into the very DNA of the human heart... **The Scriptures tell** us that we were made By God (That's Where we came from) / **& That** our Purpose is to do Life With God (That's Why we're here) / **& When** we die→ We're going to meet God (That's our Destiny) ... **& That's** why we're beginning this study on Heaven...

III. The question is-- "Where do we start?": **Well**, I would suggest that we go to the Gospels & Read the red-words-- (i.e. We should start be asking) "**What did Jesus say?**"... **Of course, if you think about it: If** what we believe about Jesus is true→ **Then** Jesus' perspective here carries more weight than anyone else-- **B/C Jesus** is the only Human who has gone to the other side of the grave & has come back...

A. In Valladolid, Spain, where Christopher Columbus died in 1506:

There stands a **Monument** commemorating the great discoverer... **At the** Bottom of the statue are three Latin words→ **With** the Lion eating the First word... **The** Three Latin words are "Non Plus Ultra" (Meaning "No More Beyond")-- **Which** for centuries was Spain's Motto→ **B/C** they believed that geographically they lived near the edge of the Earth (There's no more beyond Spain)... **But** in 1492 Columbus proved there was more beyond... **& So** the lion is eating the first word "Non" (leaving "More Beyond")... **We should recognize** **When Jesus re-appeared in His Resurrected Body→**

(He was telling us) "There's more beyond": You realize (don't you?) that there were Secularists in Jesus' day, as well-- They were called **Sadducees**... They believed that when you died→ **You're** simply Extinguished... **& You might remember** these were the ones (**Mark 12**) that tried to stump Jesus→ **With** the absurd Riddle about a woman who married the sequence of 7 different brothers→ (& Then posed Jesus with the question) **"Whose wife will she be at the Resurrection?"**... **& At** that Jesus shot back...

"Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. Now about the dead rising—have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the account of the burning bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!"

Here Jesus tells us that there are Two Reasons people can't answer the 3rd Question ("Where are we going?"): Either they don't know the Scriptures / Or They don't know the Power of God... Now, Jesus knew both: **& So**, Jesus compels us to live this life→ **While** looking through the lenses of Eternity... **& It doesn't matter what the Contingency of life are:** (e.g.) **If** following Jesus makes your life more Demanding & Complicated→ **It's** worth it b/c of what comes next... **& So**, Jesus tells us in **Matt.5:11f**...

"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven."

& If following Jesus makes your life Easier & more Enjoyable: Eternity should still affect how we Prioritize life right now... You might remember the occasion when Jesus sent His disciples out on a mission... (& They returned to Jesus exclaiming) **"Jesus**, it was great!...**I mean**, we were doing it!...**Even** the demons were subject to their authority!"... **& At that** Jesus tells them in **Luke 10:20**

"However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

By the way, Jesus didn't preach the Gospel of Life Enhancement: That's a message fashioned by our American culture-- (i.e.) Come to Jesus→ & the Church will meet all your needs / & You can maintain your role as a Consumer / & the Church's job will be to keep you (the consumer) happy (How Shallow have we become?)... & So, (in one sense) Jesus didn't guarantee this life→ He guaranteed the next life... So, either way (you see)→ Our life to be depends on the choices we make now

B. Now we could do a whole series just on what Jesus had to say about the next life: But for today, allow me to sum up His teaching in Four statements...

1st Everyone one will be Raised & Judged: Death ends no ones' existence... Every human being will be raised from the grave→ & Stand before God in what will be a Universal moment of Judgment to inaugurate the next Age-- & There will be no excused absences... Jesus put it this way in **John 5:24f**

"I tell you the truth, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life. And I assure you that the time is coming, indeed it's here now, when the dead will hear my voice—the voice of the Son of God. And those who listen will live. The Father has life in himself, and he has granted that same life-giving power to his Son. And he has given him authority to judge everyone because he is the Son of Man. Don't be so surprised! Indeed, the time is coming when all the dead in their graves will hear the voice of God's Son, and they will rise again. Those who have done good will rise to experience eternal life, and those who have continued in evil will rise to experience judgment.

Everyone will have this Experience: & Everyone will face the One who knows us through-&-through→ As His Decision ushers each of us in to one

of two opposing qualities of Life... **& No one** will be able to engage in Identity Theft→ **B/C** He knows who we are... **& No one** will demand an Appeal→ **B/C** they will know God has been Fair & Graceful...

2nd Anyone who Trusts Jesus will be Welcomed into Heaven: **You** might notice that while Jesus' view of life after death was Controversial→ **He** was always Consistent / **He** never Wavered... **Jesus** made it Clear that our eternal destiny→ **Hinges** on your relationship to Him... **& So**, Jesus tells us in **John 6:40**

For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day."

Jesus was clear about this: **Being** good enough→ **Isn't** good enough to get you to Heaven... **& We** must do more than simply acknowledge-- (i.e.) **It must also be** Translated into each belief that we hold / **& also be** Woven into how we approach life... **It really is true**→ That no one goes to Heaven b/c they're good enough... **You See, the great question on this Day will not be:** "**How** much did you sin?"... (Rather, the question will be) "**How** much did you Trust God's Answer for your sins?"... **Jesus** said in **John 8:24**

"Unless you believe that I Am who I claim to be, you will die in your sins."

Please Listen: **God** loves the Whole World→ **But Only** those who intentionally cling to Grace go to Heaven / **Only** people that Believe that Jesus is the Son of God possess Eternal Life... (So the question is) "**How** much do you Trust Jesus?"...

3rd Heaven is Real: **In John 14:1f** Jesus says this

"Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. There is more than enough room in my Father's home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you?"

When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am.

In future sermons→ It's my intent for us to take a glimpse at Heaven itself: & It won't be a matter of Speculation (Rumor / or Conjecture)→ **B/C** God has purposefully revealed His own insights into what Heaven will be like-- (i.e.) We have very Clear Indicators into what our next home will be like... **But just too Wet our Appetites:** (Notice) "**There are Many Rooms**"-- (i.e.) Heaven is a place of Community... It will not be a place to escape relationships→ **But** a place of Rich friendships... "**I'm going to prepare a Place**"-- (i.e.) Heaven is a tangible Place... You & I are going to be raised in Physically Transformed Bodies... **& So, the idea** of Heaven being some Ethereal Fog where we flitter around as Disembodied spirits with wings from cloud to cloud→ **Is** Plato's idea / **Not** Jesus'... Each of us is going to have a Resurrected Body→ **& We're** going to live in a Place... "**I will come & get You**"-- (i.e.) Heaven is a place of Unique Identity... We're not going to be Genderless-Clones... God wants You→ **The** things that make you who you are... "**So that you will always be with Me**"-- (i.e.) It's going to be a place of Unlimited Capacity & Opportunity→ **To** actually Experience God face-to-face (**& There** is more to be found in that encounter than you might realize)... As **Asaph** says in **Psalms 73**—**Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you...** **Augustine** was right when he called God "The End of our Desires"... "*You have made us for Yourself, Oh Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You*"... Being with God in person→ **Is** what we were made for... **The story is told about the little boy in a park:** & He was **Flying a Kite** on a cloudy day... & a Man approaches the boy→ (& says) "**What** are you doing?"... (& The boy says) "I'm flying me kite"... (At that the man said) "You can't even see it→ **So** how do you know it's there?"... (& the little boy said) "B/C I can feel the Tug"... **Deep in my soul**→ **I Know I was made for more than this:** (& Jesus tells me) "Anyone who Trusts Me→ **Will** be welcomed into Heaven"...

4th Heaven is not our Default destination: Yes, hell is real, too... It's not (as some would suggest)→ **The** invention of wild-eyed prophets obsessed with wrath... **& Trust me when I say→ I do not want to believe in Hell:**

If I had a choice→ I certainly would not believe in it-- **But** Jesus was far too Clear & Conclusive about Hell to deny it... As **Dorothy Sayer** writes: ***"There seems to be a kind of conspiracy to forget, or to conceal, where the doctrine of hell comes from. The doctrine of hell is not 'mediaeval priestcraft' for frightening people into giving more money to the church: It is Christ's deliberate judgment on sin... We can not repudiate hell without altogether repudiating Christ"***... **Truth is, Heaven & Hell stand together:** **To** deny Hell only serves→ **To** Minimize what Jesus did on the Cross / **To** Lower the stakes of Redemption... **If Jesus' death did not deliver us from Hell: His work on the Cross is** Less Heroic / Less Potent / Less Consequential / & Thus, Less Deserving of our Praise & Worship

Would it surprise you to know→ That Jesus had more to say about Hell than anyone else in Scriptures?: **If for** no other reason, Jesus knew (like no other)→ **What** God Forsakenness is like... **Jesus** is an Expert on Hell→ **B/C** He's been there... **& When He talked about it→ He used three Metaphors to Describe Hell:** First of all is the metaphor of **"Darkness":** **Here** Jesus reminds us that Hell will be a place of Total Isolation-- **There** will be no Community / No Friendship→ **Perhaps** more like Solitary Confinement... **It will not be** (as some Skeptics mock): **A giant Lounge** where between drinks→ **People** tell stories of their escapades on earth... **Hell** will be a place of Eternal Loneliness... **Jesus also used the metaphor of "Fire":** **I don't** know if that's Literal or not... **But I do know this--** Everyone is going to have a physical body when we are all raised... **& The point of this metaphor**→ Is that Hell will be a place of Discomfort ... **& Jesus used the metaphor of "Gnashing of Teeth":** **It's** something like the feeling you get when your driving too fast→ **& You** see those blue lights flashing in your rear-view mirror... **In other words:** **Hell** is a place where you live in eternal Regret-- **Over** not living the life you should have lived→ **& Can never live again... Hell will be agonizingly Dull** (Small / Insignificant / w/o Company or Purpose)... **& It** will not have it's own stories-- **It will** merely be a footnote in history (A Crack in the pavement)... **While** the New Heaven & Earth moves gloriously on

& So, in Matthew 7 Jesus Warns:

"You can enter God's Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose

that way. But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it."

You See, no one goes to Heaven Automatically: Yet Ironically enough, Statistics in America show that for every one person who believes they are going to Hell→ **There** are 120 who believe they are going to Heaven... Like those who embrace "Universalism" (i.e. the belief that all people will ultimately be saved)→ **You** would think we Americans feel Entitled to Heaven... **But the truth is:** Not everyone will go to Heaven→ **But** only those who Choose to go there... **Please Understand:** God doesn't send people to Hell→ **Rather** he simply honors their Choice... (As **C.S. Lewis** put it in his book The Great Divorce) *"There are only two kinds of people in the end: Those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell"*... (He goes on to say this In his book The problem of Pain) *"I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful, rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the inside"*... **No one in Hell will say→ "God put me here":** Truth is, God put Hell on His Son→ **So** that we wouldn't have to go... You See, one way or the other, our Sins will be Judged-- **But** God grants us the Dignity to choose where→ **At the Cross / Or in Hell... & No one in Heaven will say→ "I put myself here":** When we get our first Glimpse of God→ **We** will be Amazed that God would make a way for sinners like us to go to Heaven

IV. & So, we come Full Circle: After Billy Graham shared that story about Albert Einstein→ **He** went on to say this-- "See the suit I'm wearing? It's a brand new suit. My children and my grandchildren are telling me I've gotten a little slovenly in my old age. I used to be a bit more fastidious. So I went out and bought a new suit for this luncheon and one more occasion. You know what that occasion is? This is the suit in which I'll be buried. But when you hear I'm dead, I don't want you to immediately remember the suit I'm wearing. I want you to remember this: I not only know who I am. I also know where I'm going."