

***Question: What does Jesus say about heaven and hell?***

The subject of heaven and hell is a concern of many people. Sermons have been preached and books have been written on the topic. Jesus actually said more about heaven and hell than anyone in the Bible. However, he never taught directly on either of these subjects. He only made passing references to them when talking about other issues of life.

From what Jesus did say about heaven, we learn that heaven is the place of God's presence. He often spoke of our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:15; 6:9). He said that we should not swear by heaven for it is God's throne (Matthew 5:34). Jesus also said that the angels live in heaven where they always behold the face of God (Matthew 18:10) and that Christians have great reward in heaven (Matthew 5:12; see also Matthew 6:9 & 22:30). In the gospel of John, we are told that Jesus the Son came from heaven and was going back to the Father who is in heaven (John 3:13; 14:12). The word heaven is found 137 times in the New Testament gospel stories.

However, the word "hell" is found only eleven times in the books of Matthew, Mark and Luke but never in John. These four books contain almost half of the New Testament and all of the direct teachings of Jesus. Concerning hell, Jesus warned that angry words can place one in danger of "the fire of hell" (Matthew 5:22); and he said that we should not fear those who "kill the body but cannot kill the soul, rather be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). Jesus also declared that hell is where "the fire never goes out" and "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched. Everyone will be salted with fire" (Mark 9:47-49). When all nations are gathered before him in the final day of judgment, Jesus will say to those who failed to show compassion to those in prison, the sick, the hungry and the thirsty: "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41). He later added, "Then they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life" (Matthew 25:46). For other sayings about hell, see Matthew 3:10-12; 5:29; 13:40; 18:8-9.

Although we do learn something about heaven and hell from the words of Jesus, it is also apparent that

he did not use fear and reward as primary motives for trusting and following him in the Christian life. Instead, Jesus taught a great deal and very directly about the love of God shown in his grace and the gift of his Son on the cross for the sins of the world. He said that the first and greatest command is to love God (Matthew 22:36-38) and that “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

The above discussion of heaven and hell reveals that the real wonder of heaven is life in the presence of God, the loving Father of all mercy. For a Christian, the God of heaven means more than all other riches or blessing that may be found in heaven. It also means that the real horror of hell is the absence of this loving God. We must be honest with people about eternity in heaven and hell. But more than anything else, we need to help one another fall in love with God and Jesus Christ, the Son. While fear and reward may seem to get our attention, these selfish motives fall short of the real power needed to face the struggles of life and prepare for eternity. “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love” (I John 4:18).

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