

## Rethinking Eternity, Week Five

We decided to add an additional week to this series to address some questions and passages that we didn't get to in weeks 1-4. All along, our aim has not been a dogmatic pronouncement on the subject, but rather a challenge for us all to do a diligent search into the truth of the matter.

What most people believe about the afterlife is an interesting blend of philosophies, poetry and tradition... we'll make a smoothie out of it.

- We begin with a few ounces of the Greek Philosopher Plato—who's principle doctrine was the immortality of the soul. We should note that **nowhere in the Old Testament Canon** is this doctrine taught.
- Then we go to somewhere between 300 -100 B.C., and get one verse of eternal torment from the book of Judith... Have you read that book in your Quiet Times? It's doubtful, because that's not in the Bible; it is from the Apocrypha.
- Add to that a bananas worth of ancient Catholic teaching from the Dark Ages...
- Put in a healthy dose of frozen strawberries from Dante Alighieri's 13th century political satire, "The Divine Comedy" and John Milton's epic poem, "Paradise Lost."
- Pop in some misinterpretations of the book of Revelation... blend up, and, viola, you have what most people have accepted as Biblical truth, which is in fact a mishmash of ancient philosophy, religious opinions, and medieval poetry.

Given this, I decided that a 5th week of our series is in order, to sum up what we've learned and then ask the question, "Now that I know all of this, what should I do."

**Week One:** What Happens When We Die? We concluded from our study that every person who dies physically goes to an area that the Bible designates, "Hades." Hades is not hell; rather, it is a place where people go to await judgment, either in Paradise or in Tartarus (or another unnamed section of Hades where the unrighteous await judgment).

Some have objected to this view, since we assume that it goes against a longstanding traditional, historical view. But Biblical scholars are close to unanimous about this—check out Bible dictionaries, Greek word studies, and you will see that Biblical scholarship overwhelmingly agrees with this teaching.

Another interesting tidbit that I've learned along the way. There are a large number of scholars who have noted that Paradise—to which the righteous go to await their final reward—has much in common with the Garden of Eden. For example, we read this in Revelation 2:7

**Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.**

We know from Genesis 2 that the tree of life stood in the middle of the Garden of Eden. And unless it was transplanted after Adam & Eve were exiled because of sin, it's still right there, guarded by the fearful cherubim. We read this in Genesis 3:22

**And the Lord God said, "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever."**

This verse confirms two ideas:

1) that the expression 'the eternal soul of man' is not Biblical; it actually has its origins in the philosophy of Plato, not in the Bible. The Bible teaches that immortality is a gift to the faithful.

2) That the Garden of Eden is the temporary home of the righteous departed...

**Week Two:** We tried to paint a picture of heaven using the metaphors that we find in the Bible... even in human terms, it's glorious (expand)

- Streets of Gold
- Gates of Pearl
- Walls of Precious Gemstones
- A new, glorious, indestructible body

**Week Three:** We answered the question, "Do the Unsaved suffer eternal conscious torment in Gehenna?" This is the predominant view of Catholic and Protestant teaching, but we put forth our conviction that **punishment doesn't last infinitely**, but instead **the lost are punished proportionately and then their punishment ends**. Hell is eternal in its *consequences*, not in its *duration*.

How did we arrive at this?

1. It agrees with the Old Testament teachings: humankind is mortal; there is no teaching anywhere—in either the Old or New Testaments—of the 'immortal soul.' And there is no teaching in the Old Testament that would indicate any kind of belief in eternal torment.
2. It agrees with what God has revealed to us about his character. He errs on the side of grace and kindness. If we were to accept the idea of eternal torment, we would re-write amazing grace for the lost like this...  
When we've been there 10,000 years, hot, burning like the sun  
We've no less days to agonize than when we've first begun...

This is a monstrous accusation to level against the God of gods.

3. It agrees with the teachings of Jesus - the punishment fits the crime

4. It is in sync with the teachings of Paul, Peter, John, and Jude—all of whom underscore that immortality is a gift to the saved, and that people will be judged on the basis of life choices. The phrase ‘according to what they have done’ sums up the Bible’s teaching on the subject.

For those who believe in eternal torment, the burden of proof is on them. And to level such a serious charge against the Almighty, the proof would need to be ironclad.

**Week Four:** We looked at the origins of Gehenna, explored the three primary metaphors used by the Bible to describe it—fire, darkness, and bitter regret—and answered the question, “What, in Hell, Do We Want”?

Just as we believe that heaven is going to be far more glorious than the paradise pictured in scripture, so we assume that hell will be worse than the metaphors used to describe it. And yet it is comforting to know that our loved ones and friends who reject the truth do not suffer infinitely.

### **To conclude our series, I want us to look together in 2 Peter 3**

**3** Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. **4** They will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.” **5** But they deliberately forget that long ago by God’s word the heavens came into being and the earth was formed out of water and by water. **6** By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. **7** By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

**8** But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. **9** The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

**10** But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.

**11** Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives **12** as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. **13** But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.

**14** So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.

1. **Scoffers will scoff...** There are going to be many who don't like the message, as there have always been. You know, "The haters gonna hate, hate, hate, hate, hate, but baby, we're just gonna shake shake shake shake shake shake, shake it off, shake it..." The gospel is good news only if you're willing to embrace the bad news first. We've got to know that we're lost if we're going to be saved... and a secular, humanist world hates that message. They have hated that message for 2,000 years not.
2. **God's desire is to save as many as possible.** That answers the question, "Where is this coming He promised?" 1 Timothy 2:3-4 tells us this: in a passage encouraging us to pray, Paul writes, "**This is good, and pleases God our Savior, 4 who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.**" To that end, we need to love our neighbors enough to meet them, to pray for them, to serve them, and to teach them. God is patient; He is not slow in keeping His promise, but he desires everyone to come to repentance.
3. **We are called to make every effort to live holy and godly lives**—this teaching is a call for all of us to clean up our lives; we need to run from sin and to make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.

We conclude our series with this: **The Day of the Lord will come.** The heavens **will** disappear with a roar; the elements **will** be destroyed by fire. **This stuff is real.** We're not talking about Greek mythology, epic British poems, or Italian satire here; we believe that Jesus died and rose again... I'll say it again... we believe that Jesus died and rose again. We sang about it today—"Jesus, I believe in you, and I will go to the ends of the earth, to the ends of the earth, for you alone are the Son of God, and all the world will see, you are God, you are God." The early Christians lived their lives with eternity in mind; we are called to do the same.

If you're not a follower of Jesus, I beg you—dig deeply, study carefully... let Jesus pay your price.

If you are, dig in... deepen your convictions... and let your life, your outreach, and your decisions flow out of those convictions. **Prayer**