

## All Blessed Up and No Place to Go

One of the earliest notions of man was that pain and suffering was the result of bad behavior. It's simply what happens when man fails to live up to the demands or expectations of the gods, whoever, whatever, wherever they may be. But that simple concept couldn't account for pain and suffering by those whose behavior was good, or explain prosperity and happiness among those whose behavior was bad. Trying to explain that led to the idea of deferred judgment. The injustices of man's current existence would be made right at some future point. For Jews, that future point meant the coming of their Messiah, a powerful man who would defeat all the enemies of the Jews and restore the sovereign state of Israel. It would be a glorious event, and the Messiah would be a majestic figure. Past wrongs would be made right, and there would be nothing for Jews to worry about from that point on.

Jesus took it one step further. For him, the Messiah would do more than set up a political kingdom. He would also preside over the Final Judgment, with all those who had lived and died sorted into two groups: sheep and goats. Good folks, sheep, would be richly rewarded for their good conduct and righteous living, while bad people, goats, would be harshly punished for their wicked deeds. People who had died would be resurrected so they could take part in the Judgment. Following that, Jesus himself would preside over the new Kingdom of God, and serving under him would be each of his twelve disciples sitting in judgment over the twelve tribes of Israel. That kingdom would be here on earth.

The problem with that was the same problem religious doctrines always have sooner or later: they collide with reality. Then believers have to rethink their whole paradigm and make adjustments. That's religion in a nutshell. The problem with Jesus' eschatology was that it just didn't happen. He had told his followers that the Kingdom would arrive during their lifetime. When it became obvious how wrong Jesus was about that, someone had to figure out what had gone wrong and what it meant for the future. Jesus couldn't have been wrong, so his followers must have misunderstood him. What had they missed?

Paul tweaked Jesus' theory just a bit. Okay, Jesus was a bit off on his timing, but not by much. It didn't happen during the lifetime of Jesus' followers, but it would happen during Paul's lifetime. But that turned out to be a bit of a miscalculation as well. Back to the drawing board. This time, it was going to take more than a timing adjustment. Now they would have to rethink the whole concept of the Messiah and the Kingdom of God.

But that was well after the death of Jesus. As far as we can tell, most early Christians believed in the apocalyptic Kingdom of God described above. They had no concept of our modern expectations of heaven and hell. And just what are those expectations? Everybody you ask has a different perspective on that. There is no definitive answer, which explains why there are so many contradictions. People talk about looking forward to seeing their loved ones when they get to heaven. Yet, heaven is thought to be a spiritual place, not a physical existence similar to our life on earth. All seem to agree that everybody will be deliriously happy in heaven, but what does that mean? If there is no body as we know it, how can there be happiness as we know it? Heaven is thought to be such a marvelous place that believers are willing to spend their entire lives on earth in anticipation of and preparation for their future life in heaven. Yet nobody is in a hurry to get there. Believers resist going there with everything they have, and when it is inevitable, they go kicking and screaming. Instead of being happy for the dearly departed and celebrating their new digs, loved ones are left grieving and weeping in sorrow. Why? If heaven is so great, and if death is the front door, why isn't death a cause for celebration and joy?

It is obvious that many people still have a caveman mentality regarding good and evil, punishment and reward by the gods or God. If a fundamentalist quarterback wins a game, it is because his God has smiled upon him. Some players make a public spectacle of begging God for his divine benevolence in the form of games won, and thanking Him when their prayers are answered. We hear little about it when that particular team or player loses. Is the loss punishment for bad behavior? Did the player(s) not pray often enough, hard enough, or loud enough? Do they lack faith? Unlike praying for a win, any of that sort of soul-searching is done in private, not in public. You don't see a quarterback in the end zone praying to God for an explanation of why he lost the game.

Yet, if God is responsible for wins, isn't the same God responsible for losses? If God is in charge of a quarterback's life, and if the quarterback loses a game, then the loss must have been God's will. If the loss is God's will, isn't it just as good as a win? Does the Christian God really have nothing better to do than pick winners and losers in Sunday football games? Are modern Christians really that dense? Tim Tivo certainly seems to be.

The modern concept of hell is vivid enough, and it is described quite effectively in the Bible, Old Testament and New. It hasn't changed much over the centuries. But where in the Bible do we find what heaven will be like? It most certainly will not be what Jesus expected. And fundagelicals would expect him above all others to get it right. If JC didn't know, who does? Let's see what the Bible has to offer that might help solve the dilemma.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-17: (NRSV)

**But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.**

We see that Paul expected Jesus himself to usher in the Kingdom of God in a dramatic, sudden cosmic event. Those who were alive at the time would go to the back of the line while the dead would be resurrected. They would all (at least the good ones) drift upward into the air, into the clouds, and . . . then what? They would be with the Lord forever, but where? They all just hang around somewhere in the atmosphere forever? What, with earthly bodies? Does that sound like an appealing scenario to you? Paul presents us with more questions than answers in this passage.

Philippians 1:21: (NRSV)

**For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.**

Paul explains in that chapter that he's looking forward to the next life, but he's also, for the time being, totally committed to his life's work here on earth, leaving him torn between the two, and hoping that he doesn't do anything to disgrace himself or God in the process. That's a noble attitude, but it doesn't shed any light at all on what the next life will be like or why Paul is eager to get there. Nor does it tell us when Paul expects that to happen. As soon as he dies, or whenever the Lord returns to earth in the cosmic event described above?

1 Corinthians 15:50-57: (NRSV)

**What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:**

**“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”**

**“Where, O death, is your victory?**

**Where, O death, is your sting?”**

**The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.**

So, the heavenly body will not be of flesh and blood, and it will be immortal. But if it isn't a body like the one we are familiar with, what will it be like? Will we be able to recognize others that we knew during our earthly existence? What will we do? What will we be able to do? If it will not be like anything we now know or can even imagine, how can we be confident that we do in fact want to go there or be that? Maybe we won't like it. Then what? What will it even mean to like or dislike something?

Revelation 21:1-4: (NRSV)

**Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”**

John (whoever he was) seems to be saying that the new heaven and earth will be something quite different than Paul describes. John's heaven seems to be a new and improved earthly one, with mortal human bodies. God will wipe away our tears, but we will still apparently have the same kinds of eyes that once cried. Death will be no more, yet God dwells among us mortals. How does that make sense? Will be mortal or immortal? John seems confused on the issue. But he makes it clear that his heaven will be a physical one, not a spiritual one like Paul's (if I interpret his words correctly).

Both Paul and John present a dramatic transition from earthly life to the Kingdom of God or heaven. It will happen at a specific (if unknown) time. Neither of them talks about going to heaven or hell when we die. Yet that is what most people think of today. How did we arrive at that?

We got to that via an evolving concept of heaven and hell, life and death, earth and Kingdom of God that was repeatedly forced to reinvent itself as popular notions collided with reality. Jesus was wrong on his timing. Paul was wrong on his timing. Their theories had to be replaced with one that was less time-specific, tangible, and coherent. It morphed into a scenario that was no longer based on a horizontal time scale, but on a vertical sphere of spiritual, eternal, immortal existence at the top and an earthly, mortal sphere of human existence on the bottom. It was no longer based on anything Jesus taught or ever conceived of. Paul's ideas didn't come from Jesus, nor did they come from any of Jesus' disciples. They came from Paul and from the oral

traditions he had been exposed to. John's ideas came not from Jesus or his disciples, but from John and the people of his generation.

If the current Christian concept of heaven and hell is not based on Jesus, or the Bible, what is it based on? The Bible does not give us a coherent, consistent picture of heaven. So how can anyone have any confidence that they know anything at all about what heaven will be like? What we do get from the Bible is contradictory and very sketchy. It leaves almost everything to our imagination, and that's exactly where the Christian heaven is based – in the imagination of the believer. It did not come from Jesus.

Yet believers are willing to sacrifice their entire earthly life for the pursuit of this imaginary heaven. That is just the kind of bizarre thinking that makes me so distrustful of believers. If believers have minds so willing to toss aside reason and logic, they are fully capable of believing anything. That's scary. That's the kind of screwed up thinking that brought us the corrupt church of the Middle Ages, the Inquisition, the Crusades, and a lot of other butt-ugly gifts of Christianity.