

Are You Going to Heaven, or to Tulsa?¹

ARE YOU SURE YOU ARE GOING TO HEAVEN?

AGNES'S ANXIETY

Agnes had a friend, a young man who had tragically committed suicide. Her grief and sadness were heightened not only by the minister at the funeral, who asked, "Are you going to heaven when you die?" but also by hearing people whisper the idea that her friend was condemned to hell for committing suicide. Agnes's friends were even more forthright in their opinion that he was probably in hell for his actions. "The Bible tells us that suicide is an unforgivable sin. I don't know why he would jeopardize his soul by killing himself," one of Agnes's friends said to her. While Agnes didn't believe that her friend who committed suicide should be divinely punished for an obvious act of desperation, she wasn't sure how to respond to this other friend's certainty about the question of heaven and hell. She wasn't even sure she believed in life after death.

The loss of her friend and her own sense of uncertainty made her wonder what kind of God would punish people for being in such pain that they would kill themselves. Agnes was worried for herself too, anxious that she didn't know for sure if she would be going to heaven or not.

The questions of heaven and hell are of primary importance for the neo-evangelical in the Bible Belt. In many ways, the concern about the destiny of one's soul in the afterlife is the motivating force for accepting Jesus

God is a dancer with God's people, a dancer of tap, soft-shoe, tango, limbo, polka, twist, minuet, two-step, disco, ballet, and more. God gets jiggy.²

into your heart. As we noted earlier, many neo-evangelicals consider the future salvation of your soul to be dependent on your conversion, your acceptance of Jesus into your heart. "If you don't, God won't save you." Therefore, the ultimate reason for accepting Jesus is to ensure your place in heaven. The life of faith is really just a kind of "heaven insurance" so that you can be certain of being fitted with wings and a halo. You "take out the policy" by believing and doing the right things, and then

it's paid off when you die and you get your reward. Heaven is the place for people who paid the right dividends on their hell insurance. (we never thought of ministers as insurance salespersons, but it fits this metaphor.)

Obviously, there are a number of problems with this view of the world, or the afterworld. Not the least is the prevailing attitude that it's always "our people" who get into heaven and the bad guys, usually anyone who doesn't quite believe and act the way we think they should, who end up being cast into hell. Heaven becomes an exclusive country club for the beautiful people who can look down at those sinners in the ghetto of hell and feel sorry for them.³

There is an arrogance about this belief that one group has the inside track into heaven while those immoral people "out there" are doomed eternally. The question soon enough becomes, "Who would want to be in a heaven filled with a bunch of self-righteous people?" It would be rather boring, don't you think? (And surely heaven cannot be boring!)

Another problem with this view of heaven and hell is that life on earth becomes more concerned with the probabilities of the future than with the realities of the present. Historically, living one's life for the promise of future reward has often been a justification for passivity toward any kind of change here on earth. The message is "Be happy even if you are a slave, or poor, or persecuted because of the color of your skin. Be happy because you know you will be rewarded in heaven. Don't rock the boat. Don't argue with authority. Don't question certain beliefs. If you do, you might be jeopardizing your soul."

This is what Karl Marx meant when he wrote about religion being "the opiate of the people."⁴ Religion, Marx believed, anesthetizes people in this

world with the promise that they will get their reward in the next. A major flaw in this kind of belief in heaven and hell is that faith is more about rewards in the future than living the faith in the present. In other words, the neo-evangelical emphasis on heaven and hell can create a kind of spiritual navel-gazing in which the only purpose in life is to make sure "I get into heaven." It is, ultimately, a rather selfish outlook on life where I live not for others but for my own salvation. While I may want to help others into heaven, in the end, the religious life becomes more about doing the right things to get myself (at least) into heaven. In our individualistic and self-focused culture, it is no wonder this belief system finds so many adherents.

The final problem, of course, is that the God of this belief system is not the God of scripture. The God of the Old, or First, Testament (while, admittedly, sometimes appearing rather cruel in judgment and punishment) is finally the God who continues to forgive and reach out to humanity, even when people are rejecting God and God's covenant. Scripture describes God as one who forgives an adulterous wife,⁵ one who comforts despairing children,⁶ one who forgives over and over again.⁷ The God of Jesus Christ is a God who forgives and reaches out, not in judgment but in suffering love. God is a father who pines for a lost son, a woman who celebrates finding a lost coin, and a shepherd who leaves behind ninety-nine sheep to find the one that is lost.⁸ This is not a God who, in the manner that media movie critics Siskel and Ebert made famous, sits on a throne in heaven and gives a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down."

DO PRESBYTERIANS BELIEVE IN HELL?

Whenever Presbyterian ministers are asked, "What do you think heaven or hell will be like?" we often rely on our years of study and intense exploration of the Bible and theology. We rely on knowledge gained through time spent considering spiritual matters, and we reply with all our wisdom in a simple response: "Who the hell knows?"

While this may seem glib, it nevertheless expresses the truth that finally we have no details about the reality beyond this life. We have ideas and certain beliefs, but they will always fall short of the truth of what life beyond death will actually be like. We declare, with all our faith, a belief in the promise of resurrection, but we are not able to paint a definitive picture of what the resurrected life will look like. We hope you would be rather suspicious of us if we did. Presbyterians are wary of trite theological answers, or, at least, should be.

It is interesting to look at what Jesus has to say about this question. Three of the Gospels⁹ tell the story about the time a religious group called the Sadducees questioned Jesus about the resurrection. In order to understand this story, we should know that the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection. Another group, the Pharisees, did believe in life beyond death, and there was a heated debate between the two parties about this subject.

The Sadducees asked Jesus a question designed to reveal what Jesus believed about the resurrection. According to Mosaic law, when a man died leaving his wife childless, his brother was constrained to marry the woman and raise up her children. The Sadducees then presented Jesus with a puzzling situation. There were seven brothers. The first married, and finally died without children, then the second brother married the widow, and he also died without children; and then the third, and so on, and so on, until the seventh brother also died childless. (This woman is tough on husbands!) Finally the woman dies, and the Sadducees ask, "In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her." Rather tricky of these Sadducees, don't you think?

Jesus' response is interesting not only in what he says but also in what he doesn't say. While affirming a belief in life beyond death, he argues that the reality of resurrection is not like that here on earth. "In the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage." What Jesus asserts here is that the life of resurrection is not like anything here on earth. The reality is different from what we can comprehend. Jesus does not describe the reality, he does not try to give us a description of what exactly it will look or be like. He simply points out that it will be different from what we have experienced here.

"God is not a God of the dead, but a God of the living," Jesus says. God is not about death, but about life with all its beauty and possibilities. The God of life we experience here on earth is the God of life we experience beyond death. Jesus, in responding to the Sadducees, points to something that cannot be described or understood in earthly terms but only by the mystery of God who brings life where there is death. Jesus doesn't give us an explanation. He gives us assurance of life beyond death.

In the same way, Presbyterians also believe in the God of life. Presbyterians believe in the resurrection but, like Jesus, we do not have a particular description of what life beyond death would necessarily look like. While we each may have our personal opinions about the details, the more important consideration is our belief in the God of life. In other words, we don't believe in heaven as a particular kind of place. We believe (trust) in God, the God of life. Our faith is in a God who does not even let death become a barrier

to God's love.¹⁰ Heaven, then, can simply be described as being in the presence of God. It is being filled with God's love and residing in that love forever. We do not know what that will look or feel like in particular detail, but we do know that the God we experience in Jesus Christ will not let death be the final word. We can get a taste of this heaven here on earth when we live in God's love and when we share that love with others around us. Experiencing the present-day reality of being in God's presence, we catch a glimpse of the promise and joy of life eternal, even in the here-and-now of this finite and broken world. It's a far different understanding of heaven than simply a place filled with golden streets and angels playing harps.

Conversely, we could describe hell as the absence of God. Hell isn't some fiery place beyond death where sinners are punished for lax morality or wrong belief, but hell is the reality of people denying God's presence and love. (So hell could equally be an assignment into God's presence when one hates being in the presence of the God of grace!)

There are plenty of hells on earth, where people have chosen not God's love but another reality. The hell of the Holocaust was a total denial of God, an embracing of an absence of God by people who would make their cause itself a god. The hell of racism is a denial of God's presence among people who are different simply because of their skin. The hell of addiction is choosing, for momentary pleasure and very sad dependency, a god of death over the God of life. It could be said that we do not need a hell beyond death because we expertly create our own hell here on earth. Most Presbyterians believe in hell because they see it everyday on their televisions in places like Bosnia, Kosovo, Yugoslavia, the Sudan, Somalia, etc.

There is another issue related to the question of hell and evil: the issue of belief in a devil. In the Bible Belt, the devil runs a close second to Jesus on the religious top ten list. In fact, the devil sells better, considering periodic lists of best-selling books about the Antichrist and the end of the world. (We will look at this in chapter 6.)

Do Presbyterians believe in the devil? Some do and some don't. For a person to be faithful to God, one does not necessarily personally have to believe in a particular agent of evil opposed to God in the world. The reasons for this are numerous, but, essentially, too often the belief in Satan is just another excuse not to take responsibility for our own actions in the world. "The devil made me do it" is an easy way to explain away our own brokenness and our capacity for evil. If there is a devil, we only have to look in the mirror to see his or her face sometimes.

To state a disbelief in a red guy with horns and hooves doesn't mean we don't believe there is evil in the world. There is evil. You can see it in the

horrific realities of our sinful world and sometimes even in the small corners of our souls. There is no need for a devil opposed to God in the world. We humans fit that role quite nicely ourselves.

Another interesting facet of Presbyterian belief on the question of life beyond death involves an interesting phrase we speak in the Apostles' Creed. Usually in most Presbyterian churches, we will affirm our faith by reciting the Apostles' Creed. We state we believe Jesus "was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into hell. On the third day, he rose again from the dead and ascended into heaven." Does this mean that Presbyterians, in reciting this creed, are saying they believe in a literal hell "down below" or a heaven "up above"? To take this creed literally is to miss the point. (Literalism has a way of missing these things, if you haven't noticed before.)

When we speak these words, some Presbyterians may mean a belief in a particular hell and heaven, but most often we are affirming something far more important than this. In stating that Jesus descended into hell, we are making a theological statement that there is no place God will not go to bring God's love in Jesus Christ.¹¹ There is no place God will not travel to bring light and hope, even to the very gates of hell. The meaning of this creedal statement is not to affirm a literal belief in hell "down there," but the much more important belief that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ! To believe this is also to understand that the hells we create here on earth for ourselves can be and are challenged by God. Even in such a hellhole as Auschwitz, we hear stories of faith and courage that attest to the presence of God where others would deny God's love.¹² What we are stating when we affirm the faith that "Jesus descended into hell" is a theological belief that there is no place in heaven or hell where God will not seek us out and save us. Thank God for that!

GUILT OR GRATITUDE?

We believe in grace. (Are you sick of that word yet?) This belief shapes our understanding that we live out of gratitude rather than guilt. To worry constantly if one is getting into heaven or ending up in hell is to live a life either motivated by or preoccupied with guilt, guilt over wrongs we've done to ourselves and to those around us. Have I done the right things or believed in the right things to earn my way into heaven? These kinds of questions may haunt us, guilt over our failures and human feebleness may obsess us, because we worry that our failure in matters of morality may hinder our entrance into heaven. Shame and despair are too easily the result of this

kind of fear. And shame and fear hinder love more than anything else in the world. God's judgment becomes the overriding theme as we envision ourselves standing before the throne of heaven to be judged according to our deeds. Life becomes a kind of test during which any wrong move could get you tossed into the fiery lake of hell. This is a frightening way to live.

We understand that life is a gift (grace!) and that God's love comes not because we "earned points" or made the right decisions in order to get our reward later on when we die. Life is lived out of gratitude and not guilt, shaped by love and not judgment. We live a holy life not because we want to be sure we get to the "right place" after we die, but because we have experienced God's grace and wish to celebrate that gift each and every day. We live out of this sense of thankfulness and appreciation for all God has done and will do for us. The basis of life, then, is not shame but celebration; we do not live in fear but in freedom.

One interesting thing to notice in scripture is that often the first words out of the mouth of God and God's messengers when they encounter human beings is, "Do not be afraid."¹³ This is important because so much human behavior is driven by fear; and when fear is the motivator, life is diminished. In fact, it's been argued that the opposite of love is not hate but fear. There cannot be compassion for another when you are afraid of that person; there cannot be mercy for the stranger when the stranger evokes fear. At the root of most of our inhumanity to each other, for example, racism and anti-Semitism, is a basic fear of the unknown. So how can fear be the motivating force for our love of God? How can guilt and fear be at the heart of our relationship with the Source of life and love?

We Presbyterians don't believe that this can happen with any significant degree of health. We take seriously God's commandment not to be afraid. What motivates our behavior is a sense of gratitude for God's gift of love. God has been so giving and welcoming, we must respond out of thanksgiving.

Our communities are characterized, then, as places of gratitude rather than guilt, of hope rather than fear. Paul beautifully states, in his letter to the church in Thessalonica, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."¹⁴ Reformed and Presbyterian churches have, for centuries, stated that the "chief end of [every human being] is to glorify God, and to enjoy [God] forever."¹⁵ Another, more recent statement of belief also puts it beautifully: "In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives. . . ."¹⁶ Our purpose then is to rejoice, enjoy, and live joyful lives in response to the gift of God's love

and compassion. Life is more a celebration than a test to see the fitness of our souls.

A convincing argument can be made saying that, when we meet God in the afterlife, God's first question may well be "Why didn't you have more joy?"

One final story before we "get the hell out of here." This is a story about how Alex's mother joined the Presbyterian Church. She was living in Omaha, Nebraska, and pregnant with him when, one day, a Presbyterian minister knocked on her front door. She invited him in, and he began to tell her that they were starting up a new Presbyterian church just down the road. He wanted to invite her to attend their worship service. Having been raised in the Southern Baptist Church, she had a few questions about what Presbyterians believe. She said, "Well, my husband smokes, and, while I wish he wouldn't, I don't think he is going to hell for that."

The Presbyterian minister said, "Presbyterians believe that is between you and God, and that it is no one else's business. There are some Presbyterians who smoke, and there are some who don't."

Mom wasn't quite satisfied, and so she asked again, "Now, I like to have a drink now and again, and I don't think that is sinful either."

The minister said, "Well, some Presbyterians drink, and some don't."

Finally, Mom said, "And I really love to dance and don't see anything wrong with that either."

The minister replied, "Ma'am, all Presbyterians dance!" The next week she joined the Presbyterian Church.

We dance because we are grateful! Amen!

So What Do *You* Think?

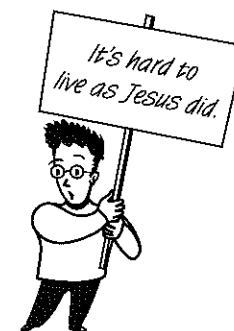
1. What do you think Jesus could have meant when he said, "God is not a God of the dead, but a God of the living" (Matthew 22:32)?

2. Compare your views of "heaven" and "hell" now with what you thought when you were younger. Have your thoughts and beliefs changed some over the years?

3. Think about these two images as they describe the way some people live: "stewing in guilt" and "dancing in gratitude." Describe what comes to mind about these two ways of living.

Is Jesus "Lord," or Just a Good Guy?

Allison and Seth are next-door neighbors. Both are fifteen years old, and neither is from a family that regularly participates in the life of a community of faith. One evening, ten days before Easter, Seth is at Allison's checking on a chemistry class assignment he'd missed because of an appointment at the doctor.



The television is on, and while taking a break from molecular reconfigurations during chemical changes, they notice a commercial being broadcast for an upcoming Easter drama at a large church in a nearby city. First, there's a ten-second preview of Jesus carrying his cross through the crowds, collapsing along the way, then a ten-second scene of the crucifixion, which leads to a fifteen-second scene from the burial garden early on Sunday morning. As the name of the church and a schedule of the pageant's performances are printed along the bottom of the screen, Allison said, "That looked a little weird to me."

"What's that?" asked Seth.

"Jesus and those followers giving 'high-fives' to celebrate his being raised from the dead."

"Guess I hadn't thought about it," replied Seth, "but now that you mention it. . . ."

"From what I know," Allison said, "Jesus must have been a good guy, but what's a thinking person supposed to make of a scene outside a tomb,