

This morning we continue our teaching series: “[The Essentials: what Christians believe and why it matters.](#)” Today’s subject is [the afterlife](#). As you felt in the clip here’s an essential belief that certainly matters... *What could be more critical to us than where we’ll spend eternity?*

Shakespeare once penned, “[Golden lads and girls all must, as chimney sweepers, come to dust.](#)” In other words, accomplishments, and portfolios, and status mean very little in the end. We all exit the same way... we die. In the long run we’re all goners - *but where will you go?*

Will Willimon, a Yale alumni, a Methodist Bishop, and a distinguished theologian once attended a funeral officiated by an old country preacher. The preacher pounded the pulpit, “[It’s too late for ole Joe. He’s dead. It’s too late for him, but it’s not too late for you.](#)” He then told the story of a Greyhound bus smashing into a funeral procession on the way to the cemetery. He shouted, “[You too could die today, and be as dead Joe.](#)”

The preacher was trying to terrify his listeners into a decision. Willimon got angry. Later he complained to this wife, “[That was so manipulative – so insensitive to the family. It was disgusting.](#)” Mrs. Willimon replied, “[Yes, it was disgusting, insensitive... and true.](#)”

This morning you may think I sound like that old country preacher. You might consider me insensitive. You may accuse me of manipulation. I certainly won’t be politically correct. But at the end of the day I have one objective – *I want to tell you the truth about heaven and hell.*

Here’s how this morning’s study will flow... First, I’m going to tell a silly joke – *just because I can*. Second, you’re going to respond with a polite chuckle – *just because you’re nice*. Then, it’s going to get real serious...

Once upon a time a rich man suffered a serious illness. His wife was by his side when he breathed his last. Just before he died, he said, “[Honey, all my life I’ve heard you can’t take it with you, but I have to try. Please promise me, you’ll put all my money in the coffin when you bury me.](#)” It was an emotional moment. She was crying. He was dying. It was definitely the final good-bye. She had no other choice. She agreed.

On the day of the funeral, just before the lid was closed, she walked up and placed a large box inside the casket. Her friend gasped, “[No, you’re not really going to bury him with his money.](#)” She said, “[I promised.](#)” Then she whispered, “[But don’t worry, I wrote him a check.](#)”

I’m sure you’ve heard lots of statements about the afterlife, “[You can’t take it with you.](#)” “[I can’t wait until I get my wings.](#)” “[When I get to heaven I’ll be on Cloud 9.](#)” Some of what you hear is true, but much is false. Let’s sift through a few common ideas and identify fact from fiction...

Some people believe in [universalism](#) – everybody wins. It doesn’t matter *what you believe* or *how you live*, God is loving and kind and would never send anyone to hell - so we all get a free pass to heaven... *There’s only one problem - this is neither loving nor kind.*

What makes you think people who spent their whole life hostile to God and His authority want to submit to Him for eternity? If people who hate God are sent to heaven – it’s not heaven for them – it’s more like hell.

And if God sends rapists, and murderers, and thieves, and liars to heaven what does that do to heaven for the people who love Jesus? Do you want unrepentant pedophiles and serial killers in heaven? In this life we have death and prisons to stop such behavior. What kind of God would allow these same people to run free in heaven forever? All of a sudden I’m in heaven, and I’ve still got to lock my doors at night, turn on the alarm, and keep a shotgun in the closet... That’s not heaven – that’s Atlanta! It makes no sense for God to send *everyone* to heaven.

Other folks believe in **annihilation** – when we die we don't go anywhere. We cease to exist. Our lives are a candle that burns for awhile, and then gets snuffed out. Yet I can think of nothing as unsatisfying – *spiritually, emotionally, even intellectually...* Then what's the point of existence? If there's nothing after death there's only despair, depression, and loss.

This is like getting Coca-Cola to erect a huge scoreboard in centerfield, and then tell the Little League team it doesn't matter if they win or lose. Of course, it matters. The fact you're keeping score proves it matters. And this is why life counts – at the end of the day you win or lose.

Understand both **universalism** and **annihilation** is refuted by Scripture. Matthew 25:46 speaks of the judgment of Jesus. He says, "**These will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.**" According to Jesus *not everybody* goes to heaven. Some people go to hell. *But everybody goes to one or the other.* We're not like snowflakes. We don't just evaporate. The human spirit is immortal. It lives forever.

Still other people believe in **reincarnation**. We're caught in a cosmic cycle. You come back in a different form - based on how you did in the previous life. It's like a Rocky movie – there's always another sequel. String together some good years, and you return as the partner of one of those really cute babes on *Dancing with the Stars*. Chalk up some bad years and you come back as the cute babe who gets paired with you.

Another false view of the afterlife is **purgatory**. Roman Catholicism invented it as an extra step to prepare for heaven. In purgatory believers get purged or cleansed of the sins the blood of Jesus apparently missed. Implied is that the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross was insufficient. We have to add to what Jesus has done by serving a stint in purgatory.

This was false doctrine, but it proved to be successful fund raising. For years, a corrupt Catholic Church sold indulgences. For a few coins you could free your loved one's soul from purgatory. This is what angered Martin Luther and lit the match to spark the Protestant Reformation. Not only does the Bible know nothing of purgatory - it was a scam.

And both **reincarnation** and **purgatory** are also refuted by Scripture. Hebrews 9 eliminates any opportunity for self-improvement, or second chances, or soul detours after death. Hebrews 9:27 tells us clearly, "**It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment...**"

According to the Bible when you die the next sight you'll see is the face of *your Maker* and *your Judge*. You'll be judged by Jesus. And how you treated Him - whether you bowed or bucked - determines your eternity.

There's another false notion of the afterlife. If you've ever been to a Seventh Day Adventist Church you might've heard of "**soul sleep.**" When you die your spirit doesn't leave your body. It goes into a state of suspended animation. A long nap gets interrupted at the end of the age. 2 Corinthians 5:8 refutes "**soul sleep.**" Paul explains, "**We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord...**" Once my spirit vacates my body I go straight to Jesus.

There's one other false notion of the afterlife I should mention. It may be the most common. The ancient Greeks viewed the body a cage. Their desire was to be free from the flesh and be a **disembodied spirit**. This is how a lot of people today view the afterlife. They think once they die they become a spiritual butterfly – a bodiless spirit with no obligations or boundaries – maybe even an angel. They'll sit on a cloud - wear a bathrobe and halo - and float around the universe.

Hey, nobody ends up a butterfly or grows angel's wings. In the Bible, humans don't become

angels, or vice versa. We're a different order of being.

Today's cultural view of the afterlife reveals our own self-absorption. We make comments like, "I'm sure Uncle Bill is looking down on us..." Little Johnny goes 3 for 3 at the plate, makes a nice play, and on the way home you say, "Well, I'm sure Grandpa was watching tonight."

As if people in heaven have nothing better to do than fixate on earth action. Has it dawned on you that the glories, and beauty, and thrill, and activities in heaven make what's happening here pale in comparison? *And trust me, if grandpa is in hell - and not in heaven* - he's got a lot bigger concerns than whether sonny-boy got a hit tonight or not.

People in the afterlife aren't wandering around the universe, or sitting on a cloud with binoculars aimed our way. They're consigned to either heaven or hell. And there's plenty to occupy them besides our every move.

Each week we start out our study with a creed of Christian belief.

Here's this week's statement of faith... *We believe in the immortality of the human spirit. Our body turns to dust, but our spirit lives forever. After death the spirit is immediately judged by Jesus. Choices in this life are made permanent in the life to come. Believers live forever with Jesus in heaven. And unbelievers live forever separated from Jesus in hell.*

I want to read Revelation 22:11. I think this verse hangs over the door to eternity. It reads, **"He who is unjust, let him be unjust still; he who is filthy, let him be filthy still; he who is righteous, let him be righteous still; he who is holy, let him be holy still."** Here is the most ominous, and sobering verse in the Bible. When you pass from time into eternity nothing will change – *except* the possibility to change.

Certain choices you made in this life will become permanent. If you were unjust, and filthy, and prideful, and rebellious in this life you'll be unjust, filthy, prideful, and rebellious forever... If you were righteous and holy in this life, you'll be righteous and holy forever.

Once a person passes from time into eternity – that person forfeits any possibility for change. In Dante's *"Inferno"* the author puts the following words on the gates of hell, **"Those who enter here abandon all hope!"**

In the Wild, Wild West there was a Wells Fargo agent named *Lester Moore*. When Les got shot, his body was buried in Boot Hill cemetery, in Tombstone, Arizona. Listen to the inscription on Les's gravestone, **"Here lies Lester Moore, four slugs from a .44 - no Les, no more."**

You can say that about every person on the day they check out of this world. What we were in this life, we'll be in the afterlife, *no less, no more*. If you were unjust you'll be unjust still. If you were righteous, you'll be righteous still. If you walk with Jesus now, you'll walk with Him forever. But if you distanced yourself from Jesus in this life, you'll be separated forever!

This is why the notion that God is too loving to send a person to hell is nonsense. In heaven we're praising and serving God for all eternity. If you didn't like to serve God on earth, how would it be loving to send you to heaven and destine you to unhappiness?

Mark Twain once quipped, **"Go to heaven for the climate, hell for the company."** I say if you don't like the crowd in heaven, *then go to hell*.

Atheist, Isaac Asimov, had a similar complaint. He said, **"Whatever the tortures of hell, I think the boredom of heaven would be worse."** Okay, if loving, praising, and learning from Jesus bores you – *you don't have to go to heaven*. If you love raising hell, then God will let you go there.

God created man with a free will. Humans are self-determinative. We choose our own way. And God loves us enough to honor that free will. He doesn't stick a shotgun in our back and say,

“Serve me or else!” For love to be meaningful it has to be voluntary – so God gives us a choice. And hell is the final affirmation of the choice some people make. As long as there’s opportunity to change God will coax, persuade, and convict - but after you die a loving God lets go. He allows you to live with your decision. Philosopher GK Chesterton once remarked, **“Hell is the greatest compliment God has ever paid to the dignity of human freedom.”**

Understand God’s plan for man has progressed through the ages. And conditions in the afterlife are no exception. Eternity is under construction.

In OT times when people died they went to a place called **Hades** - or in Hebrew, **Sheol**. Hades was a duplex. One side was *Abraham’s Bosom* - a place of comfort, and refreshment, and pleasure. Across a wide expanse, the other side – the dark side – was called the **bottomless pit**, or **Abusso**.

In Luke 16 Jesus tells a story. Some people view it as a parable, but Jesus never uses personal names in His parables. Luke 16 identifies 2 men the disciples probably knew – a rich man, and Lazarus, a beggar. The story is instructive because it gives us glimpses into the afterlife.

The rich man died and ended up in the bottomless pit. Jesus said he was **“in torments”** – plural. What’s mentioned here is scorching heat and a relentless thirst. He was conscious of his own existence. And he was aware of what was happening – *not on earth, but on the other side of the gulf*. Jesus said, **“He lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus…”** The former beggar was being comforted, while the former rich man broiled alive. He complained, **“For I am tormented in this flame.”**

It’s interesting, the rich man never asked to leave hell. Apparently, given the choice he preferred to stay. He just wanted something cool to drink. He asked if Lazarus could be sent with water to soothe his tongue. Abraham replied, **“There is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.”**

Notice the sobering word **“fixed.”** When a person dies he doesn’t end up a bodiless spirit with wanderlust. Lazarus can’t go to the rich man, or even to earth to warn his brothers. Tickets in the afterlife have restrictions. And today, 2000 years after Jesus first told this story, you can be sure the same rich man is still **“in torments,”** and the same Lazarus is still being **“comforted.”** The same will be true a billion years from now.

Once again the afterlife is a work-in-progress. On the night before His crucifixion, Jesus told His disciples, **“I go to prepare a place for you.”**

Abraham’s bosom was a holding tank until sin could be atoned for fully. After Jesus paid once and for all, to forgive our sin, He went to Hades and rounded up those who had believed in the promise of salvation. Jesus cleared out Abraham’s bosom and took the believers waiting there to heaven – into the throne room and presence of the Father.

Today, when a person’s body dies it returns to the dust - and their spirit is immediately judged by Jesus. If they believed in the person and work of Jesus, their sin was judged on the cross – they’re forgiven. If they didn’t believe, the person is judged by his or her own works and condemned.

Believers are assigned to heaven. They no longer go to the duplex. On the heels of their Savior they enter directly into God’s presence; whereas unbelievers are still assigned to the torments of Hades.

As I’ve noted, the afterlife is under construction. Though unbelievers go to Hades today, that’s not their permanent home. Revelation 20:14 tells us, **“Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire... And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.”** One day Hades and all its occupants will be cast into a permanent place of fire and

torment. In Mark 3 Jesus refers to it as “eternal condemnation.”

The Greek word translated “lake of fire” is “Gehenna.” This was a well known term for anyone living in Jerusalem. The Valley of Gehenna was southeast of the city, just outside its walls. It was an infamous location. Gehenna was a place of idolatry, and evil - even child sacrifice.

Later the valley was used as a garbage dump. *If I can be more graphic*, it was the city’s septic tank. A *constant burning* and a *noxious stench* rose from the valley. Gehenna was the best picture the NT writers could find to describe the terrible horrors awaiting those who occupy the lake of fire.

It’s interesting, that Jesus talked more about hell than any other subject. And He always spoke of it as a real, literal, actual, eternal punishment. I know hell isn’t a politically correct topic to talk about today – but can I say it just this once, *to hell with political correctness*. Whether we talk about it or not, people are going there, and they need to be warned.

This week I found inspiration from an unusual source – an atheist – Las Vegas entertainer, Penn Jillette. On *You Tube* he says he has no respect for Christians who don’t proselytize because it’s socially awkward. Jillette comments, “How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them? If I believed beyond a shadow of a doubt that a truck was coming to hit you, and you didn’t believe it, and that truck was bearing down on you, there’s a certain point where I tackle you. And this is more important than that.”

Here’s my attempt to tackle you. Hell is a terrible place. The idea of walking into hell and finding a Guns and Roses concert - beer, sex, and rock and roll – just without the air-conditioning - is a crock. Hell is hellish. It’s cramped and suffocating. It’s hot and muggy – worse than Mississippi. The rich man spoke of a “flame.” *Ever been burned? Just on the tip of your finger?*

Hell is also dark. It’s lonely. You’re desperately isolated in hell. You’re bored. There’s no meaning. No way to pass the time. You drift aimlessly.

There’s no bottom in a bottomless pit - nothing solid - nowhere to stand. My son, Zach, was a late bloomer. In Elementary School he sat in a desk that was too large. His feet didn’t hit the floor. They always dangled, and it drove him nuts. I built a little stool and took it to the school. But in hell they don’t let dads bring stools to stand on. You just dangle forever.

In Mark 9 Jesus provides a grisly description of Hades. He calls it, “hell fire.” It’s “where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.” I’m afraid to guess what Jesus meant when He said, “their worm dies not...” but I’m passing it along. He also said “the fire is not quenched.”

Fire speaks of **disintegration**. To me it seems hell’s chief punishment is its downward trajectory. Things and people disintegrate in hell. They go from good to bad - from bad to worse - and from worse to miserable. In heaven God things get better. Jesus dries our tears, but in hell you sob uncontrollably – past the point of your ability to produce tears. Hell is an eternal case of dry heaves.

Understand when God first created the man and the woman He thought of heaven – not hell. Heaven was created for mankind. In Matthew 25:41 Jesus said Hell wasn’t invented for man, but for the devil and his angels. It’s never been God’s desire for any human to spend one day in hell. 2Peter 3:9 says that God “is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.”

If you end up in hell it’s because you stepped over God goodness, and fairness, and saving grace. One author writes, “No one in hell will be able to say to God, “*You put me here,*” and no one in heaven will ever be able to say, “*I put myself here.*” It’s all about grace - and whether you humble yourself, and turn from your sin, and choose to receive that grace.

The Bible teaches that all our desires are ultimately fulfilled in God. Our longing for intimacy, security, and significance point us to Jesus... But hell is life without God - thus its **eternal desire eternally unfulfilled**. *In hell the arrogant mathematician can't add 2+2... The musician who worshipped his music can't string together two chords... The woman who lived for her vanity has a closet full of new dresses, but no mirror... The man that lived for sexual desire burns with lust for the rest of eternity...*

Hell is **eternal desire eternally unfulfilled**. Yet heaven is the opposite. Since heaven is life with God everything achieves its ultimate purpose. The guy who can't carry a tune on earth sings beautiful praises to God in heaven. The crippled child, bound to a wheelchair, dances before the Lord in heaven. The last second basketball shot I missed on earth, I get to sink over and over in heaven – and God gets glory every single time. In heaven all our angst and frustration gets transformed into complete fulfillment. Heaven is where **eternal desires are eternally satisfied**.

I think it's time to talk to you about heaven... As horrible as hell will be, heaven is a delight. The word “Eden” means “delights.” That's what God intended for life on earth. Sin spoiled God's design. But God's original intention is fulfilled in heaven. It's a place of unimaginable delights.

Twice in Scripture Jesus referred to heaven as a “Paradise.” He told the thief on the cross, “Today you will be with Me in Paradise.” In Revelation 2:7 He says to the church, “To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise...”

The word “paradise” is the Persian word for “garden.” Not a vegetable garden – think rather of an *oasis in the desert* or a *park in the city*.

Heaven is a city. In Revelation 21:2 it's called the New Jerusalem. It may come as a surprise, but God's design is for people to live in cities.

Some of you dream for the day when you can sell your house and buy a farm out in the country. You want 500 acres – as far as the eye can see... That's your paradise, until the wife gets lonely and needs a few friends - or until its time to mow the grass. Suddenly, *heaven is not so heavenly*.

God made us to be in cities – in relationship with people. Cities are the home for art, and sports, and culture, and community. But God also made us for the garden. **Heaven is the combination**. It's a garden in the midst of a city – and that's exactly how the Bible depicts the New Jerusalem. It's ironic that all civil engineers plan their cities around parks and green spaces. I think the idea came from Eden - and looks forward to heaven.

Oriental gardens were walled enclosures. They were filled with shade trees, and gorgeous flowers, and aromatic spices. Zigzagging through the trees a stream would flow. At the heart of the garden you'd find a fountain. All around the garden you'd find little arbors of manicured grass and fruit orchards – areas where you could lie down and be refreshed.

Heaven is like a botanical garden. Forget cumulus clouds, sterile white hallways, harps, and haloes. Think instead, the Swiss Family Robinson on a tropical island. Man was made for Eden, and all men are restless until they come home to the garden of delights. **Heaven is a paradise!**

Read Revelation 4 and 21, and you'll get glimpses of heaven....

Its centerpiece is God's throne. His Son sits on His throne. Jesus rules in heaven. His will gets done. His preferences reign supreme.

Heaven is also multi-sensory... From God's throne shoot lightning bolts and thunder. The voice of Jesus is like a waterfall. Fiery lamps burn before the throne - from under it flows a river – on its banks grow trees with fruit and leaves for healing. In the middle of the garden is the Tree of Life... Now that we're fully redeemed we can eat its fruit and live forever.

Though there's a river, there's no sea in heaven. Before air travel the sea separated man into races and tribes. In heaven we're one nation.

The sea also sets limits to discovery. Heaven has no such boundaries. In heaven you can explore God's wonders to your heart's content.

Heaven is indeed a visual extravaganza - glass walls, pearls for gates, jeweled footers, crystal foundations... The famous streets of gold reveal heaven's priorities. Gold is just asphalt in heaven. In the New Jerusalem a man's wealth is measured by love, grace, kindness, and holiness.

This Thursday I went to see a man I hadn't seen in 27 years. He's in the hospital, and can barely breathe. He wore an oxygen mask. Years ago, I'd been his pastor. Now on death's doorstep, he wanted to see me again.

He could only speak in 10 second bursts; then he'd catch his breath. He confessed to sins he'd committed. He admitted he'd denied God. Then he said, "[Pastor Sandy, I don't want to go to hell. I need God to forgive me.](#)"

We prayed a sinner's prayer, and when we were done I grabbed a cup of water off the hospital tray, and poured it on his head. I said, "[I baptize you my brother in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit...](#)" And suddenly, an amazing peace rolled over my friend. His tortured soul was finally at rest. Hell had been robbed. He belonged to Jesus.

I know this is 2009. I know we live in a pluralistic, post-modern world. I know telling someone – or a group of someones – they're going to hell is viewed by many as hate speech. But I also know I'm telling the truth... Everyone within the sound of my voice is headed to heaven or hell. And you are the one who decides your destination by how you treat Jesus.

Call me insensitive if you like, but at the end of the day I want there to be more people in heaven and fewer people in hell. If that's a crime, then I'm guilty.

Let's close with this week's statement... [We believe in the immortality of the human spirit. Our body turns to dust, but our spirit lives forever. After death the spirit is immediately judged by Jesus. Choices in this life are made permanent in the life to come. Believers live forever with Jesus in heaven. And unbelievers live forever separated from Jesus in hell.](#)

BONUS MATERIAL:

If you're a believer this life is as close to hell as you'll ever get. But if you're an unbeliever this life is as close to heaven as you'll ever get.

Allen Iverson, superstar guard for the Philadelphia 76ers, talks about the death of his friend Rah, who was murdered, and his thoughts about the afterlife: "I want to go to heaven," said Iverson. "When I die, I want to see Rah. I know he's in heaven, and before I die, I want to know that's where I'm going. I don't want to have to guess. I want to know that's where I'm going."

After a Christian dies their service for God is judged. It's put through a kind of quality control. What was done in sincerity is rewarded – what was done out of selfish motivation is burned up - but their spirit enters heaven.

There are no second chances. Hebrews 9:27, tells us, "It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment..." The sentence of death is "*forever without parole*". It's a one-way ticket. It seals our fate - decides our eternity. Once you pass through death's door there are no return trips.

A little girl was taking an evening walk with her father. Wonderingly, she looked up at the stars and exclaimed; "Oh, Daddy, if the wrong side of heaven is so beautiful, what must the right side be!"

Following a campaign speech, a young man rushed up to Senator Everett Dirksen and said, "Senator, I wouldn't vote for you if you were St. Peter!" Dirksen eyed the young man for a moment, then said: "Son, if I were St. Peter, you couldn't vote for me, because you wouldn't be in my district."

A new believer was on a plane with an intellectual (a man educated beyond his intelligence). He sneered at her reading the Bible. Asked if she believed it? "Yes." "Jonah and the whale story?" "Yes." "How did it happen?" "Don't know, but I'll find out when I get to heaven." "What if Jonah isn't there?" "Then I guess you'll have to ask him for me."

67% of American adults believe in a hell. But less than 25% believe they will go there. - *USA Today* poll, December 1986.

QUOTES:

"Heaven is an unknown region with a well-know inhabitant."

"The vague and tenuous hope that God is too kind to punish the ungodly has become a deadly opiate for the consciences of millions." – AW Tozer

"The one who judges us most is the one who loves us most fully." - Frederick Buechner

"All beauty in the world is either a memory of Paradise or a prophecy of the transfigured world."
- Nicholas Berdyaev, Russian religious and political philosopher (1874–1948)

“To those who have learned to love and trust Jesus, the prospect of meeting him face to face and being with him forever is the hope that keeps us going, no matter what life may throw at us.
- James Packer

“We are afraid that Heaven is a bribe, and that if we make it our goal we shall no longer be disinterested. It is not so. Heaven offers nothing that a mercenary soul can desire. It is safe to tell the pure in heart that they shall see God, for only the pure in heart want to.” - C.S. Lewis in “The Problem of Pain.”

“The caricature of heaven as an eternity of idleness has no basis in Scripture. Instead, the N.T. conception unites the two thoughts of being with Christ and of service for Christ. This blending is definitely set forth in the last chapter of Revelation where we read of 'those who serve Him, and see His face.' Here the life of contemplation and the life of active service are welded together as being not only compatible, but absolutely necessary for completeness. But remember that if there is to be service there, the exercising ground is here. I do not know what we are in this world for unless it is to apprentice us for heaven. Life on earth is a bewilderment unless we are being trained here for a nobler work which lies beyond the grave.” - Alexander Maclaren

“What hell is, we know not; only this we know, that there is such a sure and certain place.” - Martin Luther