

Heaven and Hell – Part 3

 sightedmoon.com/sightedmoon_2015/

By Joseph F. Dumond

August 22, 2009

More than one hell in the Bible

So what is the truth about hell? What does the Bible really teach? Many are surprised to learn that the Bible speaks of three hells—but not in the sense that is widely believed. Let us discover why there is so much confusion about hell.

From the original languages in which the Bible was written, one Hebrew word and three Greek words are translated “hell” in our English-language Bibles. The four words convey three different meanings.

The Hebrew word sheol, used in the Old Testament, has the same meaning as hades, one of the three Greek words translated “hell” in the New Testament.

The Anchor Bible Dictionary explains the meaning of both words: “The Greek word Hades...is sometimes, but misleadingly, translated ‘hell’ in English versions of the N[ew] T[estament]. It refers to the place of the dead...The old Hebrew concept of the place of the dead, most often called Sheol...is usually translated as Hades, and the Greek term was naturally and commonly used by Jews writing in Greek” (1992, Vol. 3, p. 14, “Hades, Hell”).

Both sheol and hades refer simply to the grave. A comparison of an Old Testament and a New Testament scripture confirm this. Psalm 16:10 says, “For You will not leave my soul in Sheol, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption.” In Acts 2:27, the apostle Peter quotes this verse and shows that it is a reference to Jesus Christ. Here the Greek word hades is substituted for the Hebrew sheol.

Where did Christ go when He died? His spirit returned to God (Luke 23:46; see “The Spirit in Man” on page 14). His body was placed in a tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea. The two passages, in Psalms and Acts, tell us Jesus’ flesh did not decay in the grave because God resurrected Him.

Many scriptures that use the term hell in the King James Version are simply talking about the grave, the place where everyone, whether good or evil, goes at death. The Hebrew word sheol is used in the Old Testament 65 times. In the King James Version it is translated “grave” 31 times, “hell” 31 times and “pit”—a hole in the ground—three times.

The Greek word hades is used 11 times in the New Testament. In the King James translation, in all instances but one the term hades is translated “hell.” The one exception is 1 Corinthians 15:55, where it is translated “grave.” In the New King James Version, the translators avoided misconceptions by simply using the original Greek word hades in all 11 instances.

One word is for demon imprisonment

A second Greek word, tartaroo, is also translated “hell” in the New Testament. This word is used only once in the Bible (2 Peter 2:4), where it refers to the current restraint or imprisonment of the fallen angels, otherwise known as demons.

The Expository Dictionary of Bible Words explains that tartaroo means “to confine in Tartaros” and that “Tartaros was the Greek name for the mythological abyss where rebellious gods were confined” (Lawrence Richards, 1985, “Heaven and Hell,” p. 337).

Peter uses this reference to contemporary mythology to show that the sinning angels were “delivered...into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment.” These fallen angels are now restrained while awaiting their ultimate judgment for their rebellion against God and destructive influence on humanity.

The place where they are imprisoned is not some dark or fiery netherworld. Rather, their confinement is on the earth, where they wield influence over the nations and over individuals. The Gospels record that Jesus Christ and His apostles had very real encounters with Satan and His demons (Matthew 4:1-11; 8:16, 28-33; 9:32-33; John 13:26-27). Jesus even referred to Satan as the ruler of this world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11).

The term tartaroo applies only to demons. Nowhere does it refer to a fiery hell in which human beings are punished after death.

Another word for burning—burning up, that is

Only with the remaining word translated “hell,” the Greek word gehenna, do we see some elements people commonly associate with the traditional view of hell—but not in the manner portrayed in the hell of men’s imagination.

Gehenna refers to a valley just outside Jerusalem. The word is derived from the Hebrew GaiHinnom, the Valley of Hinnom (Joshua 18:16). “Religiously it was a place of idolatrous and human sacrifices . . . In order to put an end to these abominations, [Judah’s King] Josiah polluted it with human bones and other corruptions (2 Kgs. 23:10, 13, 14)” (Spiros Zodhiates, The Complete Word Study Dictionary New Testament, 1992, p. 360).

At the time of Jesus this valley was what we might call the city dump—the place where trash was thrown and consumed in the fires that constantly burned there. The carcasses of dead animals—and the bodies of despised criminals—were also cast into Gehenna to be burned. Jesus thus uses this particular location and what took place there to help His listeners clearly understand the fate the unrepentant will suffer in the future. They would have easily grasped what He meant.

Immortal worms in hell?

In Mark 9:47-48, for example, Jesus specifically refers to Gehenna and what took place there. But without a proper historical background, many people draw erroneous conclusions as to what He said.

Notice His words: “It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell [gehenna] fire—where ‘their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’” Any inhabitant of Jerusalem would have immediately understood what Jesus meant, since Gehenna—the Valley of Hinnom—was just outside the city walls to the south.

Without this understanding, people commonly end up with several misconceptions about this verse. Some believe the “worm” is a reference to pangs of conscience that condemned people suffer in hell: “‘The worm that dieth not’ was nearly always interpreted figuratively, as meaning the stings of envy and regret” (Walker, p. 61). Many believe that the phrase “the fire is not quenched” is a reference to ever-burning fires that torture the damned.

This scripture has been notoriously interpreted out of context. Notice that the phrase “their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” appears in quotation marks. Jesus is quoting from Isaiah 66:24. A proper understanding of His statement begins there.

The context in Isaiah 66 refers to a time when, God says, “all flesh shall come to worship before Me” (verse 23). It is a time when the wicked will be no more. What will have happened to them? In verse 24 we read that people “will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind” (NIV).

Notice that in this verse Jesus notes that the bodies affected by the worms are dead. These are not living people writhing in fire. When Jesus returns, He will fight those who resist Him (Revelation 19:11-15). Those who are slain in the battle will not be buried; their bodies will be left on the ground, where scavenging birds and maggots will consume their flesh.

According to the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (1980), the original Hebrew word translated “worm” in Isaiah 66:24 and Mark 9:47-48 means “worm, maggot, [or] larvae.” Neither Isaiah nor Christ is talking about immortal worms. The vermin of which they speak, maggots, would not die while maggots because, sustained with flesh to eat, they would live to turn into flies. The flies would then lay eggs that hatch into more maggots (the larvae of flies), perpetuating the cycle until there is nothing left for them to consume.

This background information helps us better understand Jesus Christ’s words. In His day, when the bodies of dead animals or executed criminals were cast into the burning trash heap of Gehenna, those bodies would be destroyed by maggots, by the fires that were constantly burning there or by a combination of both. Historically a body that was not buried, but was subjected to burning, was viewed as accursed.

What does Jesus mean in Mark 9:48 when He quotes Isaiah in saying, “the fire is not quenched”? With the preceding background we can understand. He means simply that the fire will burn until the bodies of the wicked are consumed. This expression, used several times in Scripture, refers to fire that consumes entirely (Ezekiel 20:47). An unquenched fire is one that has not been extinguished. Rather, it burns itself out when it consumes everything and has no more combustible material to keep it going.

When are the wicked punished?

But, we might ask, when does this punishment take place?

As we saw earlier, Jesus quotes from the prophet Isaiah, who wrote of a time after the Messiah establishes His reign on earth. Only then would all humanity “come and bow down” before Him (Isaiah 66:23, NIV). Only then would this prophecy be fulfilled.

Jesus uses a common site of trash disposal in His day—the burning garbage dump in the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem’s walls—to illustrate the ultimate fate of the wicked in what the Scriptures call a lake of fire. Just as the refuse of the city was consumed by maggots and fire, so will the wicked be burned up—consumed—by a future Gehenna-like fire more than 1,000 years after Christ returns (Revelation 20:7-9, 12-15).

Peter explains that at this time “the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up” (2 Peter 3:10). The implication is that the surface of the earth will become a molten mass, obliterating any evidence of human wickedness.

What will happen after that? The apostle John writes: “Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away” (Revelation 21:1). The entire earth will be transformed into a suitable abode for the righteous who, by that time, will have inherited eternal life.

The destruction of soul and body in hell

Another place where Jesus speaks of gehenna fire is Matthew 10:28: “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell [gehenna].”

We should notice that Jesus does not speak of people suffering everlasting torment. He says that God can destroy—annihilate—both the body and soul in Gehenna fire. (To learn more, see “Do Some Bible Verses Teach We Have an Immortal Soul?.”)

Jesus here explains that, when one man kills another, the resulting death is only temporary because God can raise the victim to life again. But when God destroys one in hell (gehenna), the resulting death is eternal. There is no resurrection from this fate, which the Bible calls “the second death.”

The Bible explains that unrepentant sinners are cast into the lake of fire, or gehenna, at the end of the age. “But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death” (Revelation 21:8).

This verse and others like it show that the doctrine of universal salvation is false. Not everyone will be saved. Some will, in the end, refuse to repent—and they will suffer punishment. But that punishment is not to burn in fire without ending. Rather, it is to die a death from which there is no resurrection.

As we discussed earlier, the wicked will be destroyed. They will not live for eternity in another place or state of everlasting anguish. They will reap their destruction in the lake of fire at the end of the age. They will be consumed virtually instantaneously by the heat of the fire and will never live again.

The wicked burned to ashes

Another passage that graphically illustrates the utter destruction of the wicked is found in Malachi 4:1: “For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up,’ says the LORD of hosts, ‘that will leave them neither root nor branch.’”

The time setting is the end, when God will bring retribution on the wicked for their rebellious, reprehensible ways. To those who surrender to God and live in obedience to Him, God says: “You shall trample the wicked, for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day that I do this,’ says the LORD of hosts” (verse 3).

God, speaking through the prophet Malachi, makes clear the ultimate fate of the wicked. They are to be uprooted like a nonproductive tree, leaving not so much as a root or twig. They will be consumed by the flames of the lake of fire, leaving only ashes.

The Bible does teach that the wicked will be punished by fire—but not the mythical hell of men’s imagination. God is a God of mercy and love. Those who willfully choose to reject His way of life, characterized by obedience to His law of love (Romans 13:10), will die, not suffer forever. They will be consumed by fire and forgotten. They will not be tortured for all eternity. Remember that eternal life is something that God must grant, and He will grant it to only those who repent and follow Him—not those who persist in rebellion against Him.

Realize that the final death of the incorrigibly wicked in a lake of fire is an act not only of justice, but of mercy on God’s part. To allow them to continue to live on in unrepentant, eternal rebellion would cause themselves and others only great sorrow and anguish. God will not put them through that, much less torture them for all eternity in excruciating torment without end. The encouraging truth of the Bible is that God is indeed a God of great mercy, wisdom and righteous judgment. As Psalm 19:9 assures us, “The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.”

Lazarus and the Rich Man: Proof of Heaven and Hell?

Many interpret one of Jesus' parables to mean that people have immortal souls that go to heaven or hell immediately at death. But does this parable really say that? Let's examine the matter, paying close attention to the historical context.

Jesus presents the following story: "There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.

"So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. Then he cried and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.'

"But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. And besides all this, between us and you 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.'

"Then he said, 'I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.'

"Abraham said to him, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.'

"And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'

"But he said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead'" (Luke 16:19-31).

When we look at this account in light of other scriptures and in its historical context, it becomes apparent that this is an allegory, a familiar story of the time that Jesus uses to point out a spiritual lesson to those who knew the law but did not keep it. It was never intended to be understood literally.

Bible language expert Dr. Lawrence Richards, in discussing this passage in *The Victor Bible Background Commentary, New Testament*, explains that Jesus used contemporary Jewish thought about the afterlife (which by this time was influenced by pagan mythology) to point out a spiritual lesson about how we view and treat others.

In this view of the afterlife, Hades, the abode of the dead, was "thought to be divided into two compartments" and "conversations could be held between persons" in the abode of the righteous and those in the abode of the unrighteous. "Jewish writings also picture the first as a

verdant land with sweet waters welling up from numerous springs,” separated from the second, which was described as a parched and dry land. These elements show up in Christ’s allegory.

“In Christ’s story God was the beggar’s only source of help, for the rich man was certainly not going to do a single thing for him!.... It is important to see this parable of Jesus as a continuation of His conflict with the Pharisees over riches. Christ has said, ‘You cannot serve God and Money’ (16:13). When the Pharisees sneered, Jesus responded, ‘What is highly valued among men is detestable in God’s sight’ (16:15).

“There’s no doubt that the Pharisees remained unconvinced.... And so Christ told a story intended to underline the importance of what He had just said...

“During this life the wealthy man would surely have been featured on the 1980s TV program, ‘Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous.’ The cameras would have focused on his marble mansion with its decorative wrought iron gates.... and the fabulous feasts he held for his important friends.

“As the TV equipment was taken into the rich man’s home, a cameraman might have stumbled over the dying beggar, destitute and abandoned just outside the rich man’s house.... Surely he was beneath the notice of the homeowner, who never gave a thought to the starving man just outside, though all Lazarus yearned for was just a crumb from the overladen tables.

“If we look only at this life, the rich man seems to be both blessed and fortunate, and the poor man, rejected and cursed. There is no question which state people would highly value, and which they would find detestable.

“But then, Jesus says, both men died. And suddenly their situations are reversed! Lazarus is by ‘Abraham’s side,’ a phrase which pictures him reclining in the place of honor at a banquet that symbolizes eternal blessedness. But the rich man finds himself in torment, separated from the place of blessing by a ‘great chasm’ (16:26). Even though he begs for just one drop of water, Abraham sadly shakes his head. No relief is possible—or appropriate!...

“The rich man had received his good things, and had used them selfishly for his benefit alone. Despite frequent injunctions in the O[l]d T[estament] for the rich to share their good things with the poor, this rich man’s indifference to Lazarus showed how far his heart was from God and how far his path had strayed from God’s ways. They were his riches, and he would use them only for himself. Ah, how well the rich man depicts those Pharisees who ‘loved money’ and who even then were sneering at Jesus!

“And so Jesus’ first point is driven home. You Pharisees simply cannot love God and Money. Love for Money is detestable to God, for you will surely be driven to make choices in life which

are hateful to Him. A love of money may serve you well in this life. But in the world to come, you will surely pay.

“But Jesus does not stop here. He portrays the rich man as appealing to Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers, who live as selfishly as he did. Again Abraham refuses. They have ‘Moses and the Prophets’ (16:31), that is, the Scriptures. If they do not heed the Scriptures they will not respond should one come back from the dead....

“In essence then Christ makes a stunning charge: the hardness and unwillingness of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law to Jesus’ words reflect a hardness to the Word of God itself, which these men pretend to honor....

“This entire chapter calls us to realize that if we take this reality seriously, it will affect the way we view and use money, and the way we respond to the poor and the oppressed” (1994, pp. 193-195). This is the point of the allegory Jesus uses, Dr. Richards explains, not to teach the popular (but erroneous) idea of heaven and hell.

Are Some Tortured Forever in a Lake of Fire?

“The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are [or were cast, as many acknowledge this should be rendered]. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Revelation 20:10).

Does this verse say that these two end-time individuals, the Beast and False Prophet, will be tormented for eternity?

The Beast and False Prophet are human beings. While still alive, they will be cast into the lake of fire. “Then the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who worked signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who received the mark of the beast and those who worshipped his image. These two were cast alive into the lake of fire burning with brimstone” (Revelation 19:20).

We see from Malachi 4:1-3 and Mark 9:47-48 that any human being thrown into the lake of fire will be destroyed. He will perish. His punishment will be eternal. But he will not be tormented for eternity.

Revelation 20:10 is speaking of Satan the devil being cast into the lake of fire at the end of Christ’s 1,000-year reign. Reference to the Beast and False Prophet being cast in is only parenthetical here—as they will have died when that happened 1,000 years earlier. They will not still be burning there. Thus being tormented “forever and ever” applies principally to Satan—and presumably to his demonic cohorts as well (compare Matthew 25:41).

Furthermore, it should be pointed out that the Greek phrase translated “forever and ever” here, *eis tous aionas ton aionon*, literally means “unto the ages of the ages.” While this might mean for eternity, it could also mean until the culmination of the ages, which would allow for an ending point soon after the casting into the fire.

Will the Torment of the Wicked Last Forever?

“He shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name” (Revelation 14:10-11).

At first glance this passage may seem to confirm the traditional idea of a seething, sulfurous hellfire, mercilessly and eternally tormenting helpless immortal souls. But if we don’t already hold to a preconceived mental picture of hell, we can quickly grasp that this passage describes a considerably different circumstance.

First, notice the setting for this passage. From the context we see that the events it describes occur on earth amid earth-shaking events and disasters occurring immediately before or at Christ’s return, not in hell or the afterlife at all. This warning describes the punishment that will befall all the earth’s inhabitants “who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.”

Chapter 13 describes this “beast”—an end-time dictatorial superpower opposed to God—and its mark. Those who accept this mark show that their allegiance is to this powerful system rather than God, and in chapter 14 God reveals the consequences of that choice—warning of the terrifying punishments that will precede Christ’s return (see verses 14-20 and the following two chapters).

Notice also in this passage that the smoke from these terrifying events ascends forever—it does not say that the people’s actual torment continues forever. David wrote in Psalm 37:20 that “the wicked shall perish [not be tortured forever in hell]...Into smoke they shall vanish away.”

The smoke is also no doubt associated with God’s wrath poured out on earth as described in Revelation 16—which includes widespread destruction, great heat, warfare and a massive earthquake. All these events will generate massive fires and a huge amount of smoke. The properties of smoke are such that it “ascends forever and ever” (14:11)—meaning that nothing will prevent or stop it. Being a column of heated gas containing tiny, suspended particles, it rises, expands and eventually dissipates. Moreover, the Greek phrase translated “forever and ever” does not have to mean for all eternity. It could just refer to this happening in the culmination of the ages.

The reference in verse 11 to the wicked receiving “no rest day or night” speaks of those who continue to worship the beast and his image during this time. They will be in constant terror and fear for their lives, and thus aren’t able to find a moment’s rest during this terrifying time of God’s anger.

Rather than describing eternal torment of people in hell, from the context we see that this passage is actually describing specific events to take place on earth at the end of this age.

Does the Bible Speak of Hellfire That Lasts Forever?

Two verses that many assume prove the wicked are to be eternally tortured in hellfire are Matthew 25:41 and 25:46. But do they? Let’s take a closer look.

First, notice the setting to which they refer—when Jesus “comes in His glory” (verses 31-32). We are told that He separates the sheep from the goats. The sheep represent the righteous (verses 34-40). At His return He sets the sheep at His right hand. The goats in this instance represent sinners. They are appointed to assemble on Jesus’ left hand. He then consigns the goats to “the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41).

The word everlasting is translated from the Greek word *aionios*. The key to understanding this verse is knowing what will occur everlastingly. Does it refer to a fire that tortures without end, or does it have another meaning?

In Matthew 25:46 Jesus spoke in a single sentence of everlasting (*aionios*) punishment and of life eternal (*aionios*). Since the righteous will be given eternal, or everlasting, life, many theologians believe the punishing of the wicked must last as long as the life given to the righteous. But this cannot be reconciled with the statement that those cast into the lake of fire perish—they are killed. As explained elsewhere, they suffer death—the second death (Revelation 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8).

A plain and simple meaning of Matthew 25:46 that fits with the rest of the Bible is that the wicked are cast into a fire that annihilates them—renders them forever extinct. The resulting punishment of being cast into the *aionios* fire is a one-time event. It is a permanent punishment, the results of which will remain forever—that is, eternal death. It is not ongoing punishing that continues forever without end. This is the only explanation that agrees with the rest of the Scriptures.

An additional point needs to be made regarding the meaning of *aionios*. Genesis 19 describes God’s destruction of two cities, Sodom and Gomorrah, for their wickedness: “Then the LORD rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah” (Genesis 19:24). They were utterly destroyed—consumed by fire.

In the New Testament, the book of Jude describes these cities as “suffering the vengeance of eternal [aionios] fire” (verse 7). Yet it is obvious that the fires that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah are not still burning. In the case of these cities and in the case of the wicked, who are consigned to aionios fire, the fire burns and completely destroys. But the eternal aspect of the fire is its everlasting effect, not how long it actually burns.

Is Heaven God’s Reward for the Righteous?

Is the reward of the righteous an eternity in heaven? It seems almost four out of five Americans believe it is (National Review, Nov. 9, 1998). Through the centuries this has been the hope taught by traditional Christianity.

What would going to heaven be like? What would we do there for all eternity? More fundamentally, does the Bible actually present heaven as the reward of those who are saved? Human imaginings about heaven

Beliefs about heaven as the reward of the saved have varied considerably through the centuries. Traditional pictures of heaven sometimes show an entrance with a rainbow arching over it, perhaps marked by a bridge of gold or glass. St. Peter is usually represented as the doorkeeper. The inhabitants are shown accompanied by angels, or they may appear as angels themselves, having apparently sprouted a pair of wings.

Another common view in the popular consciousness has the inhabitants sitting about on clouds plucking harps. The decor of heaven often features jewels, stars, candles and trumpets. Theologians and philosophers have adapted their concepts of heaven through the centuries, influenced by the society around them. “Monks and friars, depending on whether they felt more at home in the countryside or in the city, preached a heaven defined primarily in terms of environment” (Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History*, 1988, p. 108). Based in part on their own experiences and preferences, some religious teachers have foreseen a rural setting while others have imagined an urban paradise. For the latter, “heaven became a city...or the visionary experience of celestial castles. Accounts of the other world resonate with descriptions of golden streets, jewelled buildings, and richly dressed residents” (ibid.).

Some in the Renaissance era envisioned a spicier paradise: “In its boldest form, the new theology envisioned heaven as a place of erotic human love in the bucolic setting of a comfortable natural landscape” (ibid., p. 112).

An eternity in heaven doing what?

The relationship the heavenly inhabitants might have with God has been debated. A modern author describes the way many people have imagined interaction with God in heaven: “There

the saints shall eternally, without interruption, feast their eyes upon Him, and be ever viewing His glorious perfections” (John MacArthur, *The Glory of Heaven*, 1996, p. 221).

Others believe that, if this is all they are to do forever, heaven may prove to be a pretty boring place. As the same writer just quoted from puts it, the prayer of many could be: “Please God, don’t take me to heaven yet...I haven’t even been to Hawaii!” (p. 49).

The modern Christian concepts of heaven present a diverse landscape. Another writer says: “I have a theory that heaven will offer faithful Christians whatever they sacrificed on earth for Jesus’ sake. My mountain-climbing friend who intentionally lives in a slum area of Chicago will have Yosemite Valleys all to himself. A missionary doctor in the parched land of Sudan will have her own private rain forest to explore” (Philip Yancey, “What’s a Heaven For?” *Christianity Today*, Oct. 26, 1998).

For many people the most important aspect of heaven is the opportunity to see their loved ones again: “By far the most persuasive element of the modern heaven for many contemporary Christians is the hope of meeting the family again. Countless ‘in memoriam’ sections of newspapers throughout Europe and America reflect the belief that families parted by death will be reunited” (McDannell and Lang, p. 309).

God does have a plan that will reunite loved ones, as we will see. But the popular ideas of heaven fall far short of capturing the majesty and purpose of God’s plan.

Continued at https://sightedmoon.com/sightedmoon_2015/?page_id=533