

## 25) OUR HOPE BEYOND, Part 3

In this final chapter of Theology 101, we engage the question: what happens to us after we die?

Let me begin by saying that no one is an expert in providing any definitive answer. We need a lot of humility when we speak of our hope beyond this life. But this doesn't mean we cannot find some assurance and hope that inspires and empowers us to live our lives with abundance and peace here and now all the way to our dying and death. As already suggested in earlier chapters, the bible says all kinds of things and it uses language more imaginative than scientific or analytical to talk about an afterlife. There are three specific ideas described in some way in the bible: 1) heaven, 2) hell, and 3) a last judgement.

**1) Heaven.** As already mentioned in chapter 24 of Theology 101, heaven is the place we all hope to enter after we die. It is place of comfort and peace. It is where the kingdom of God is now and where we hope some day it will merge with life here on earth so that heaven and earth may become one (Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven, as we pray in the Lord's Prayer). Heaven is also a place where the pain of bodily decay, illness or injury are no longer issues and where we are no longer vulnerable in mind or spirit. We are embraced in a fullness with others who have already entered that dimension of reality. Our identity is important as it is God-given. We are each unique and have formed relationships based on love, however imperfect. We hope for a reunion with loved ones in the heavenly dimension.

So what happens to our bodies? In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul offers us the fullest discussion on what is hoped for our bodies. They will eventually be reconstituted in a kind of incorruptible form when resurrected. This is the body Jesus already had in his risen state as the pioneer resurrected human leading the way for the rest of us in time. The New Testament belief is that in time we will be fully re-embodied persons in the kingdom of God living eternally (with bodies that do not decay or breakdown). The why is more important than the how here. Bodies are part of us whether we like them or not. Our vulnerability and need shapes who we are, and how we grow in love involves care for our bodies and those of others in all their mental-physical-spiritual reality.

The resurrection of the dead, however, imagines more a fulfillment of love rather than the need to care for one another in all our vulnerability as we do here on earth (with all our physical and mental decay and our inner struggles emotionally and spiritually). We will all be living the fullness of love and peace with one another and the divine in glorious communion. Once again, this is imagined and hoped for. No one has come back from the other side as witness. But growing in our living in and out of love here and now does prepare us for life in the heavenly dimension. Caring for one another here and now prepares us for living in the kingdom of God where only love energizes and where all anti-love energies are banished.

**2) Hell.** And this brings us to the topic of Hell. What happens if we live and die with hate in our hearts or selfish indifference. What if fear in the face of our vulnerability leads to a life of abuse in how we treat ourselves in our addictions or how we treat others by taking advantage of them, ignoring them, neglecting them or harming them? Hell (like heaven) only emerged as a belief for the Hebrews after much of the Old Testament was already composed. By the time of Jesus most every Hebrew believed in an afterlife with heaven, hell and a last judgement (more on the latter further below). So what did Jesus believe and teach in this regard?

First of all, Jesus redescribed God's heart, will and law as love. The Old Testament privileges God as "steadfast love" more than anything else too, but there is also some mixed messaging about anger and wrath and judgement in God being worked out. But all of Jesus' teaching and living becomes about how love challenges, forgives, heals, restores and calls out all injustice too. God as love and Love as God is Jesus' teaching and living. Jesus died with such love in his heart and he uttered it from the cross as a victory against all the hate and fear amassed against him.

Second, though, Jesus lives in a world where good and evil are fighting it out. There are angels and demons, and there is Satan seeking always to undermine God's will to heal a fallen world ruled by corrupt rulers harming creation by dominating and controlling for power and wealth. Jesus' way is to give his life in total solidarity with victims everywhere, in total condemnation of the evil possessing the hearts and actions of those who do harm. But Jesus is also opening the door of God's love to forgiveness for all who are prepared to enter therein. Jesus begins the offer of forgiveness with his own people as the gateway for the rest of the world. Sadly, he is rejected by those who rule. He dies a horrible death. But his victory is that love will never die and only keep rising up again and again in and through all those who have caught the wind and flame of his Spirit. And this victory of love through his Spirit flowing through are the seeds of the kingdom of God in heaven seeking to create a greater foothold in this world until all evil is finally banished.

But what happens to those who are so possessed by anti-love they cannot live in the kingdom of God where only love is the energy in all relations? Jesus talks of hell for those who are leaders of the people. They believe in hell and use it as a hammer to keep the people in fear and guilt in order to control them. In all his teaching and parables, Jesus reverses the understanding of hell to apply to all those who abuse their people beginning with the religious authorities who are hypocrites, representing God yet embodying the demonic in their behaviour and heart. Throughout the gospels Jesus is clear that hell is for those who preach it and use it to threaten and abuse others.

But what is hell, then? Is it a place? Will people actually go there? Is hell a forever space where people can never leave? Will they suffer a tortured existence eternally?

Hell was conceived in such terms by people who were so deeply wounded and traumatized that their hope of relief was in a thirst for revenge against all those who harmed them. Relief of the pain and grief could only be imagined by revenge against their enemies. Eternal torture in a place enemies and tyrants could never escape (hell) was the answer of a tortured heart. And yet, can a God who is infinite love be truly love if God allows for an eternal hell? Is any part of God's creation worthy of eternal torture? Can people not be made accountable in some future eternity without having to suffer eternal torment? Can hell be a kind of purification of spirit for those who have died in this world totally at odds with the kingdom of God's love in relation? Does the journey of healing and accountability have to end with death, with only hell or heaven as options without recognition that we are all in-between in some way?

Personally, I cannot believe in a hell of eternal torture. I cannot recognize this as the revelation of God in Jesus or the movement of his Spirit. Grace and hell are total contradictions. You can't fully believe in one without rejecting the other. We need to be freed from such vengeful imagination. But I do believe in a last judgement, and this brings us to the final point.

**3) Last Judgement.** In the New Testament world, most everyone believes not only in a life beyond this life, but in a last judgement of some kind. Is the last judgement based on deeds? What's the standard then? Sure there are some people who do terrible things in this world, but what about us with our petty daily sins piled one on top of the other. Yes, we have love in us, with care, compassion and even forgiveness in our hearts. And yet we fail and we fall and we miss the mark all too often. Will we suffer judgement too?

We all need purification. We all need peace. This is why the gateway to the life beyond according to Jesus and the New Testament is "grace." Our welcome by God our creator and Abba is always a gift to us, a gift of infinite love greater than all our sins great or petty. The basis of the Christian life here and now is not merit. It is grace. As we experience love beyond anything we earn or deserve, we live out such love in relation to others in the world who get it wrong all too often too. Compassion with accountability. Justice with a heart in process of fully healing and reconciling is always our goal as kingdom of God followers of Jesus. We need to receive grace daily and we need the Spirit to flow through our hearts every moment of every day. When we meet our maker in the great beyond, we will do so with the confidence and peace that we are loved beyond anything we have done or failed to have done. And with such grace we will also keep growing in our journey toward wholeness eternally. Might as well get started here and now.

What are those areas of your life where you need to keep growing and healing toward wholeness? How may the light of grace in you shine brighter as a beacon of the kingdom of God in you seeking to reach out into the world? May you find your special purpose and path at this time of your life, in anticipation of a more intimate meeting with your maker in the great beyond. To God be the glory! Amen.

