

## **Heaven and Hell in an Age of Tolerance Revelation 14:1-20**

How do we make a sermon on heaven and hell into a “Mother’s Day” Sermon? You might think it is impossible, but leave it to your pastor to find a way. As all of know, good mothers tell us the truth. Good mothers don’t merely comfort us with tender words, they instruct with words that are true. It is in that same vein that I share with you this morning. These words are like the words of a good mother; they are true. To be sure, we may not want to hear all of them, but we need to hear them nonetheless.

And for those of you wanting a traditional, yet predictable and sentimental Mother’s Day sermon, I remind you that sometimes we all need to “eat our vegetables!”

“On 12 December 1984 a dense fog shrouded M25 near Godstone, in Surrey, a few miles south of London. The hazard warning lights were on, but were ignored by most drivers. At 6.15 a.m. a lorry carrying huge rolls of paper was involved in an accident, and within minutes the carriageway was engulfed in carnage. Dozens of cars were wrecked. Ten people were killed. A police patrol car was soon on the scene, and two policemen ran back up the motorway to stop oncoming traffic. They waved their arms and shouted as loud as they could, but most drivers took no notice and raced on towards the disaster that awaited them. The policemen then picked up traffic cones and flung them at the cars’ windcreens in a desperate attempt to warn drivers of their danger; one told how tears streamed down his face as car after car went by and he waited for the sickening sound of impact as they hit the growing mass of wreckage farther down the road.” (Robert Peterson, *Hell on Trial*, Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1995, 242)

This morning it is my distinct charge from the fourteenth chapter of Revelation to throw orange traffic cones at your windshields warning of you of an impending crash. Yet most of us no longer believe in the implications of judgment and a place of eternal torment called hell. We no longer believe in a crash that lies ahead for all those who do not place their faith and trust in the Lamb who was slain. As those traveling along in our Lexus and Mercedes, we would much rather debate the finer points of how all religions agree, rather than wrestle with what makes them different. And it is the difference of Christianity that regards Jesus Christ that makes all the difference for eternity.

One pastor admits, “My congregation would be stunned to hear a sermon on hell.” His parishioners are “upper-middle class, well-educated critical thinkers” who view God as “compassionate and loving, not someone who’s going to push them into eternal damnation.” (Peterson, pp. 236-7.) In fact, a 1990 Gallup survey found that 78 percent of Americans thought they had an “excellent or good chance of going to heaven,” while only 4 percent thought they had the same chance of “going to hell.” (Peterson, p. 236.) While we like to talk about heaven, we would rather avoid the topic of hell in our pluralistic and tolerant age.

As Tim Keller writes, “It’s tempting to avoid such topics in our preaching. But neglecting unpleasant doctrines of the historic faith will bring about counter-intuitive consequences. There is an ecological balance to scriptural truth that must not be disturbed.” I couldn’t agree more.

If we lose the Scripture’s distinctive teaching on heaven then we also lose its distinctive teaching on hell. In the same way if we lost the Bible’s distinctive teaching on judgment then we also lose its wonderful and comforting message of grace. We cannot have heaven if we do not want to consider hell. What the Bible says about one, it clarifies for the other.

With that in mind, it makes perfect sense that the Lord would want us to see the realities of heaven and hell placed right up against each other in the same passage like it is here in Revelation chapter 14.

Chapter 14 begins with a marvelous vision of the redeemed saints of God. They are those purchased by the Jesus work upon the cross. Heaven is pictured as a wonderful service of worship where Christians sing a “new song” about the grace of the Lamb. *The passage pictures them as virgins not because they have kept themselves pure from the world’s ways, but because they have kept themselves from the world’s master.* They have not defiled themselves because they did not receive the mark of the beast nor submit to his power.

Consequently, chapter 14 ends with a vision of the Son of Man, that is Jesus Christ, returning to judge humanity. This judgment is pictured as two mighty reapings. First the grain is reaped and then the harvest of grapes. Both capture the idea of judgment and its consequence of eternal hell. Chapter fourteen begins with heaven, but reminds us of hell.

What is one to do with such a text? It is obviously Biblical, but should we really take the Bible seriously on this point? Well, it’s in verse 6-11 that I believe we find our answers. Let’s try to answer the following questions:

- **Why do we have to even talk about heaven and hell?**
- **Shouldn’t everybody go to heaven? Doesn’t everybody deserve it?**
- **Is God’s anger justified? Isn’t he more like a two year old throwing a temper tantrum?**

### **1) Why do we have to even talk about heaven and hell? (6-7)**

Between the picture of heaven and hell are three angelic messengers that help us answer these questions. The first angelic messenger comes with the urgency of the Gospel’s message, “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of the water.” (7)

Such a message reminds that the reality of heaven and hell is a **First Priority** for the servants of God. Why do we have to talk about heaven and hell? The Bible’s answer is simply this: it is a very important conversation. It should be the first priority in your life, to make certain the direction of your life.

It is for this reason that they angel proclaims. Surely the angel is symbolic for the church’s mission throughout the world to proclaim the Gospel of hope—to every nation and tribe and language and people. Now is the time to deal with Jesus because at the time of his appearing it will be too late.

It is for this reason that the Gospel must go forth with words and not only deeds. The primary message of the Gospel is not the deeds that we should do. Its message regards the deed which Jesus Christ has done in dealing with sin, death and hell. Only Christianity teaches that Jesus went to hell so that we would be spared hell. So if we make Jesus life simply an example to follow and not a Savior to trust in, we have confused the Gospel. Only words can clarify the character of the Gospel of Heaven and Hell.

For this reason, we must be faithful and winsome in talking with people about what the Gospel is. In a sense, there is no more important conversation that we can have with a person. How tragic it would be for someone to think that Christianity is merely about the love and good deeds that we perform and not the love and good deed that Christ has performed for our salvation?

So the first reason we talk about heaven and hell is its priority! What’s the second reason?

### **2) Shouldn’t everybody go to heaven? Doesn’t everybody deserve it? (8)**

In verse 8 another angel harkens. This one cries out, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who make all nations drink the wine of the wrath of her sexual immorality.” Here Babylon clearly

represents the worldly system arrayed against God typified by the ancient empire and city of Babylon, but also by the Roman Empire and all subsequent world dominating systems.

The angel announces the end of all rule apart from the rule of God in Christ. But the point is to highlight the weak foundations of the city of Babylon. It could not stand up to the Day of the Lord. The city of Babylon is the object of **Misplaced Confidence**. This misplaced confidence is pictured as being drunk with the wine of sexual immorality. And, in the book of Revelation particularly sexual immorality is a metaphor for spiritual adultery. In other words, adultery is idolatry. It is for this reason that not all go to heaven. Heaven is reserved for those who have placed their ultimate confidence in that which can sustain his wrath!

**Textual issue:** Verse 8 teaches that the nations are drunk with the passion of immorality, but I think that it is more appropriate to read it as the wrath of immorality. In other words, the nations are drunk with the immorality that results in the wrath of God.

With this in mind, there is only one who has finally dealt with God's wrath. That one is Jesus Christ. It is not as though we are pure and unstained from immorality. As Christians, we are no more or no less sinful than those around us. In fact, we should remind ourselves at this point: **None of us deserve heaven!** The difference lies in **where our confidence lies**. Christ is the one who submitted to the wrath of God on our behalf and so his foundation is secure. And this is why Christianity is so different from other world religions. It is the only one that says someone else has secured heaven for us!

Those who look the foundations of Babylon, or this worldly city, are doomed to receive what they deserve. As the angel says, **Babylon is fallen!** They have tried to secure heaven through their own efforts. And, they will simply get what they have chosen. The world promises life in any number of ways—money, health, spirituality as defined by you, relationship, self-actualization, achievement, power, sexual conquest, influence, etc. All of these characterize Babylon and all cannot insulate you from God's holy wrath. They amount to a terribly **misplaced confidence**.

C.S. Lewis's depictions of hell are significant. In The Great Divorce Lewis depicts a busload of individuals from hell having the opportunity to experience the outskirts of heaven. Yet upon entry they find themselves unable to enter into its blessing. Like addicts enslaved to cocaine, only the thought of returning to the familiarity of hell can sustain them. At the very least, the fruits of heaven might be worth stealing before returning to hell.

Ultimately, hell is the fruit of our own confused choice about where life is found. We may even like the fruits of heaven, but we want to eat them in the comfort of hell where we can be our own masters. The reason why anyone would go to hell is because we have chosen its master and its life.

**Hell is about the slavery of misplaced confidence.**

So the second reason we talk about heaven and hell is its concerns our **confidence**. What or who are we trusting in? What's the third reason?

**3) Is God's anger justified? Isn't he more like a two year old throwing a temper tantrum?**

Finally, we come to the third angel. He calls out, "If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name." (9-11)

Our failure to understand the eternal character of hell and the suffering which characterizes is due more to a failure of perspective. The angel announces the eternal character of hell's judgment because we would never consider such a consequence for our own sin. We must start with the **Right Perspective!**

Remember the statistics. At most, we might think we must fix our sins in the after life, like in the movie Flatliners where five medical students go through near death experiences and become obsessed with correcting their mistakes. Others of us might believe in some sort of reincarnation wherein we solve the sins of or past lives. No matter, it all amounts to forms of self-salvation to escape the eternal realities of hell.

One pastor tells the story of his first trip to the high dive at the local pool. On this Saturday he felt as though that diving board was the World's Highest. The kids called out, "Com on." From down on the ground it didn't look to high. So, after standing in line he started climbing the ladder. After walking out to the edge of the platform he said, I "nearly died! It was too far down!" Humiliated he climbed back down the ladder. (Peterson, p. 238)

This illustrates a very important theological point. From the perspective of fallen or sinful humanity, an eternal and tortuous penalty for our failures seems outrageous. Yet viewed from above, from the position of God's holiness such a view makes perfect sense. For it is from above, from the position of God's righteousness, that sin and its consequences can be measured.

Coming to terms with heaven and hell is ultimately coming to terms with the one who defines reality and forsaking our own definitions. Only **God's perspective can orient us to our questions about heaven and hell.**

In every culture much is made about heaven and hell. In fact, even in a tolerant, pluralistic age like our own recasts hell through the lens of movies like Flatliners where mistakes must be corrected.

I would submit to you that the issue is not do we believe in heaven and hell. We already do. No, the issue is are we oriented to **God's perspective on heaven and hell**, have **we placed our confidence in the Lamb who was slain or are we still trusting in Babylon**, and have we **settled this as a priority?**