

August 27, 2006

Heaven? Hell? Sheol? Hades? And How to Escape the Wrath of God

Psalm 32:1-5 / Micah 7:18-20 / Job 14:1-22

I need to tell you before I even begin that some of you seated here today may be uncomfortable with my message for this morning. Not because I'll say anything heretical, or unorthodox, but because I'll be saying things that may not fit what you've been taught in the past. Yet, that's what pastor's are here for, right?! To stir things up a little, and get you to think about what the Bible really teaches, what you believe, and why!

For that reason I will be sticking close to my manuscript, and will ask you not only for your close attention, but also your charity as listeners, as I help us grapple with an undeniable, yet very neglected (and often purposely skipped over) part of Old Testament revelation.

It has to do with what the OT saints believed or understood concerning the afterlife — that is, what the OT saints understood and expected to experience when, or after they died. That's what Job deals with today.

You see, as a child growing up in Sunday School, I was taught that the destiny of OT saints was the same as New Testament saints. When they died they went to heaven just like we do. The materials my church used, took the NT concept of heaven, and superimposed it, backwards, onto the OT. Something they did (I assume) for the sake of continuity, and a desire to avoid confusing children. (I'm assuming that that's also what most here we essentially taught? Yes?)

But in some ways I think that being taught that actually caused more confusion than it helped avoid—at least for those teens and young people who went on to read and study the OT in depth. Because when one does that, they discover that the OT vision of the afterlife was far different than it is in the NT, because the OT vision of the afterlife didn't even include heaven at all.

Mike Mason is right when he says:

"Sooner or later in this book we must grapple with the complex question of Job's attitude (and that of the Old Testament in general) towards death and the afterlife... It is important to realize that throughout the Old Testament there was no equivalent to the Christian concept of "Heaven." Heaven was the place where God dwelt, but there was never any suggestion that the faithful might go there when they died. Rather, the Hebrew word for the abode of the dead was "Sheol," and Sheol was a murky limbo of a place, cold and foreboding."

Despite what we may have been taught, it's true. Anyone who studies the OT in depth will see he's right. Thus we hear statements like this coming off the lips of OT prophets, priests and kings—speaking of Sheol in Psalm 88:12, Heman the Ezrahite says,

*“Is Your love declared in the grave, Your faithfulness in Sheol?
Are Your wonders known in the place of darkness, or Your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?”*

Going to Sheol is seen as being a little bit better than intense earthly suffering, though this life is seen as preferable to Sheol if one is not suffering. That's why Hezekiah, who is saved from dying an early death by putting a medicinal salve on his infected boil, can say:

“You restored me to health and let me live... In your love you kept me from the pit of destruction... for Sheol cannot praise you, death cannot sing your praise, those who go down to the pit cannot hope for your faithfulness. The living, the living, they praise you as I am doing today.” (Isaiah 38:16-18)

Likewise, Job, when forced to choose between his intense suffering or Sheol, does choose Sheol, because at least there, he “would be lying down in peace, asleep and at rest with the kings and counselors of the earth,” for there “the wicked cease from turmoil, and the weary are at rest. Captives are at ease, and slaves no longer hear their taskmasters shouting” (Job 3:13, 17).

Yet he also is quick to tell us seven chapters later, Sheol is “the place of no return... the land of gloom and deep shadow, the land of deepest night; of deep shadow and disorder, where even the light is like darkness.” (Job 10:21-22)

The New Bible Dictionary sums it up this way:

“The Bible has little to say about the state of the dead. However, even in the OT man does not cease to exist at death, but his soul descends to “Sheol” (often translated, grave, death, destruction, or pit, and is referred to as “the region of darkness,” (Job 10:22) or “the land of silence.” (Ps. 94:17)). Here the dead, who are gathered in tribes (or groups), receive the dying (Is. 14:9-10). Sheol is not so much a place, as the state of the dead. It is not non-existence, but it is not life... It is the OT manner of asserting that death does not terminate existence.”

The OT saints were promised that God “would not abandon them to (or leave them in) Sheol” (Ps. 16:9-11), but would eventually bring them into His presence — a promise He apparently fulfilled through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (if we read I Peter 3:19 correctly), where we are

told that Jesus descended into Hades or Sheol, "to preach to the spirits imprisoned there" (Hades being the NT word for Sheol).

Though Sheol is sometimes translated hell, or equated with hell, it seems that until the resurrection of Jesus nearly all people went there (saint and sinner alike), except Enoch and Elijah who were translated into the presence of God without seeing death (or literally, "Sheol") and the thief on the cross to whom Jesus said, "Today you will be with me in paradise."

Likewise, Luke 16:19-31, and The New Bible Dictionary point out that there appears to have been "divisions within Sheol for the wicked and the righteous, in which each experiences a foretaste of his final destiny... This idea appears to underlie the imagery of the parable of The Rich Man and Lazarus."

In that parable the Rich Man "looks up and sees Abraham afar off" — the same idea conveyed in the Parable of the Prodigal Son where "while the son was still afar off, the Father saw him and ran to him."

The Rich Man, then, did not look up and see Abraham in heaven (as so many preachers, I believe, wrongly suggest), but in another region of Hades! The region where the righteous dwelt, which was much more pleasant than the region where the unrighteous dwelt — for that region was obviously an excruciatingly painful place, and more akin to our normal understanding of what hell is like.)

Thus we see that UNTIL THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST, nearly everyone went to Sheol. But after the gracious work of Jesus in redemption, the righteous were liberated from Hades or Sheol, and now go to be with Christ in paradise immediately upon their deaths, while the unrighteous continue to go to that excruciatingly painful region of Sheol that we call hell. Everyone with me so far?

And here, lest I perpetuate a myth prevalent in the church at large, I must add, that the final or eternal destiny of believers is NOT to live in heaven as disembodied spirits forever. Never was, and never will be! That belief finds its roots in the folklore of the middle ages, and NOT in the Bible, though it has, unfortunately, continued on ever since — often adopted as true and unquestioned dogma even by Bible believing Christians — especially from the 1850's to the 1970-80's.

Yet Isaiah, Romans, I Corinthians, II Peter, and Revelation all make it clear that the final destiny of the Christian is NOT TO SPEND ETERNITY IN HEAVEN, but to live eternally, on a new earth! A sin-purged earth! God (says the Bible over and over and over again) will create a new heaven and a new earth, and we will live upon that new earth in immortal, imperishable, glorious, resurrected bodies!

Not ghost-like bodies, but bodies that have solid, material substance; can be touched, and eat food, just as Jesus did after His resurrection, and yet can also de-materialize and walk through walls and then rematerialize, as Jesus also did after His resurrection.

“God’s promise,” says Peter in II Peter 3:13, is that He will create a “new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.” A new earth made of rich soil, and gorgeous flowers, and towering trees, and beautiful forests, and fields of wheat swaying in the warm breezes; a world of beautiful waterfalls, and flowing streams, and rivers with water so clean it always sparkles — a pristine world restored to its primeval beauty, and perfection, just as it was in the beginning, before it was marred and polluted by sin in the Fall.

A new earth, where unlike this one, the presence of sin and evil and all of its polluting effects, will have been totally eradicated (Revelation 21:1).

A world where there will be no strife, or war, or conflict, or terrorism, or racial discrimination, or religious disharmony. A world with no pain, or tears, or sickness, or prejudice, or ghettos, or gangs, or poverty, or crime, or marriage, or sex.

It will be a world where God’s will be done on earth as it now is in heaven, because Satan will have been “bound” and cast into the pit, and the presence and influences of sin will have been totally eradicated! “In keeping with God’s promise,” says Peter, “we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.” The ETERNAL home of the redeemed!

THAT, my friends, is the Christian’s ultimate hope, and eternal destiny! NOT to spend eternity in “heaven” existing as ghostlike spirits in an ethereal state forever, but to live on a new earth. The goal of redemption has never been escape from the material world, but the restoration and renewal of the material world!

As J. Richard Middleton notes:

“Heaven... has no intrinsic role as the final destiny of human salvation. Indeed, there is not one single reference in the entire biblical canon (Old or New Testament) to ‘heaven’ as the

eternal destiny of the believer. While this idea has a vastly important role in popular Christian imagination (and even in some theologies), not once does Scripture itself actually say that the righteous will live forever in 'heaven'... Since the mid-seventies I have been asking my students (in adult Sunday School classes, in campus ministry study groups, in undergraduate and graduate courses) to find even one passage in the Bible that actually says that Christians will live in heaven forever (or that heaven is the final destiny of the righteous). After a lot of searching, they admit—incredulously—that they can't find any."

He's right, you know. In fact, I extend the same challenge to you — not because I want to trounce anyone's faith, but because I want your faith to be more solidly grounded in the Bible than human traditions. And in the Bible, heaven is merely a temporary state of existence where believers wait expectantly for the ultimate hope of resurrection, and the restoration of all things. As Acts 3:21 tells us, "Jesus must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore all things, as He promised long ago through His holy prophets."

And Paul says, "The whole creation has been groaning as in the pangs of childbirth, right up till the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." That is, as we wait for the resurrection of our bodies, when we will be raised from the dead, and clothed with immortality! What a glorious hope! A hope so much more glorious than mere heaven!

Which means that to the question often asked in evangelism: "Do you want to spend eternity in heaven?" The answer should be a resounding **NO!** ***I want to spend eternity as God promised long ago through His holy prophets — in my resurrected body, living on the new earth, and affirming the wonders of God, and the beauty of His material creation!*** (10 acres in Vermont!) Which brings us back to our text!

That's what Job longed for as well. "As water disappears from the sea," says Job, "or a riverbed becomes parched and dry, so man lies down and does not rise. Till the heavens are no more (or maybe we could say, "till the present heavens are no more!") men will not awake or be roused from their sleep." (vv. 11-12)

It is Job (I believe) giving us a hint of his hope, or his belief in the resurrection of the dead, when he and all other believers will be roused from their "sleep," the "grave," or "Sheol" — the place where the DEAD EXIST until the end, when God restores all things.

“If only you would hide me in the grave,” Job says, or literally “If only you would hide me in SHEOL, and conceal me till your anger has passed. If only you would set a time (that is, for the length of my stay in Sheol), and then remember me!” (v. 13)

When I read that I couldn't help but be reminded of a WWII Documentary I once saw, where a hurricane was approaching a fleet of ships in a harbor, and the commander issued an order that all the surface vessels be faced head-on into the direction of the winds, but the submarines be sent out to sea and submerge. Because it was noted that the safest place to be in a hurricane, is in a submarine, far below the turbulence at the surface, where everything is the same as it always is—as if there was no hurricane at all!

That's what Job seems to yearn for in this passage — to be “submerged” in death, or hide in the grave, or Sheol, until God's anger (like that hurricane) has passed. NOT FOREVER, of course!

The fear of every Jew was to be “abandoned to Sheol!” To go there and have to stay there forever!

For the believer Sheol was a place where the weary were at rest, but it was also a place of darkness and silence, and thus Job does NOT want to be left there forever! (v.13-14)

It's similar to some modern-day believers, for whom life has gotten to be so difficult that they yearn for death and heaven, while they await the promise of their new, resurrected body! Their immortal, imperishable body! A body that doesn't ache, or get sore, or breakdown, or deteriorate, or get sick, or feel pain, or grow old!

A body that will walk on a new earth, the virtual restoration of the Garden of Eden, only this time it will REMAIN an unspoiled paradise! (Hold up the Bible and fold cover to cover — Genesis to Revelation. “This is the goal of redemption!”)

Now I wish I could end there, on such an upbeat note! But I can't, because no sooner does Job say all those things, and give expression to his hope of resurrection, than he drifts back into doubt, hopelessness and despair — which, of course, is understandable, since he didn't have the assurance of God's promise in His Word like we do.

If Job is, as many scholars think, one of the oldest, if not the oldest book in the Bible, it would mean he probably didn't even possess a copy of the first five books of the OT, never mind the whole Bible like we do. And because he didn't have the sure foundation of God's promises in

His Word, Job vacillates back and forth between hope, and despair / faith and doubt / what he yearns for or thinks God will do given His holy, good and righteous nature, and yet fears God may not do. Because in his day, God had YET to speak definitively through His prophets and apostles.

Thus struck by a wave of doubt and uncertainty, Job goes on to say in the very next verse: "If a man dies, will he live again?" (v. 14) In other words, will God really do it or do I just wish he would?

But then his hope returns, and he says in the second half of the very same verse, "All the days of my hard service I will wait for my renewal to come. You will call and I will answer you; you will long for the creature your hands have made."

"Surely then you will count my steps, but not keep track of my sin. My offenses will be sealed up in a bag, you will cover over my sin."

And in that statement Job shares what it is that gives him the only hope that he will escape God's anger, and not be abandoned forever in Sheol — the one thing that assures him that if a man dies, he will live again.

WHAT IS IT THAT GIVES HIM SUCH HOPE? That God will "COVER over his sin." It's the same thing David says in Psalm 32, and which Paul quotes in Romans 4:8 when speaking of justification by faith alone, apart from the works of the law, and what the righteousness credited to us by faith really is: "**Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are COVERED.**"

Which leaves us to ask: What do they all mean when they talk about God "covering" their sins.

Job actually gives us the clearest understanding when he says, "My offenses will be seal-ed up in a bag; you will cover over my sin." Because the word translated "cover over" there, means, "to conceal," "to hide from view," or "to bury out of sight."

(He must have been thinking of a woman's pocketbook! Things get so hidden in there that you can never find them! Like the lady I saw the other day trying to find her cell phone which was ringing in her pocketbook! She could hear it, but she sure couldn't find it! Sorry ladies, I couldn't resist!)

Or in light of the other imagery Job has been using, “of being hidden in the grave”— to “cover over” would be like, “burying him in a casket, and covering it over with dirt.”

Thus, the resolution of Job’s problem of how to escape God’s anger comes full circle, and he tells us, *It’s not a matter of HIM being hidden in a grave, or buried in the ground until it passes, or concealed in Sheol. It’s a matter of his SINS being hidden. Not HIM being covered or concealed from God, but his SINS covered, buried, or concealed by God—which is how God forgives.*

In forgiveness God does NOT forget our sins, since it is impossible for God to forget anything! He knows all things! When Scripture says He remembers our sins no more, its using judicial language. That is, He chooses not to remember them, or drag them up from the past to be used against us in the present or the future.

And likewise, God does NOT forgive on the basis of good things we do to try and compensate for the bad things we’ve done. God does not forgive us for past sins because we change our ways. Because NOTHING we can do is sufficient to pay the penalty for offenses committed against our infinitely holy God!

Those who think in terms of trying to do enough good to outweigh the bad things they’ve done, will have a rude awakening on the Day of Judgment, when God reiterates his decree, that, “By the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.” (Gal. 2:16) No one will ever be saved by doing good things.

Likewise, some (like Job) think they can hide from God’s wrath in death. They forget that death is NOT the termination of life! We don’t cease to exist at death! Both Old and New Testament make that perfectly clear. “Man is appointed once to die, and then comes the judgment.” (Heb. 9:27)

In that sense every person is an eternal being. Once created, people NEVER cease to exist, because even if they die, God will still raise them up at the Last Day—just like believers, to stand before the judgment seat of Christ and “give an account of everything they have done in the flesh.” (1 Cor. 5:10)

EVERY person will live forever, the only difference being WHERE they will live for all eternity — the UNBELIEVER to pay the price for all his sins eternally in hell, and the BELIEVER to live eternally on the paradise of the new earth, grateful that the price for all his sins was paid for him by Christ on the cross.

Which brings us to our conclusion: That if one is to escape the wrath of God against their sins, they must have their sins "covered." The question is, covered with what? Scripture gives us a TWO ways to visualize it.

- 1.) Covered with the radiant, gleaming, resplendent ROBE of Christ's Own Sinless, Flawless Righteousness. "My soul rejoices in my God," says Isaiah, "for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness."
(Isaiah 61:10)

It's the same imagery used in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, where the Father calls for the servants to "bring his son the best Robe, and put it on him." WHY? Because the tattered, filthy, smelly clothes the son returns in represent the filth of his sin, and the Father's robe represents the Robe of His own flawless righteousness which he uses, NOT to remove his son's filth, but to cover over it!

God doesn't make us pure and then forgive us! He forgives us first, and then clothes us with the pure, spotless Robe of Christ's Righteousness, which covers our sin until the day he does make us pure.

And 2.) the other imagery is just as powerful. In the Old Testament, before a person could enter into the holy place where God's Name or presence dwelt, or the priest enter into the Holy of Holies once a year on the Day of Atonement, they had to be covered with the blood of a sacrificial animal — blood that fore-shadowed the Blood of the Lamb, "who was slain from the foundation of the world."

If there were no blood stains covering their robes, they could NOT enter into the presence of God, "for without the shedding of blood there can be no forgiveness of sin," as we read in Hebrews 9:22. Without the blood, they lack that one necessary thing which pardons and covers their sin.

So I ask you: **Are YOUR sins covered?** Have you trusted in Christ, and by faith in Him been clothed in the spotless, radiant robe of His flawless righteousness?

Are you trying to produce a righteousness of your own, even though God has said you can't? Are you hoping to tip the scales in your favor, not realizing you could never do enough good things to even compensate for one sin against such an infinite God?

Are your garments sprinkled with the blood? Has the blood of Christ covered your sins? Have you been plunged into the "fountain filled with blood, drawn from Emmanuel's veins?" It the only way to escape God wrath against your sin. YOUR SINS MUST BE COVERED!