Heaven, Hell, and the Vocabulary of the Afterlife — The Short Version

Paper 4 in a 12 Part Series

by Escape the Mustard Tree

A plain-language companion to Paper 4. Everything here is worked out at length there, with the Greek, the objections, and the sources.

One word doing too many jobs

Open most English Bibles and the word "hell" stands in for **four different words**. Two of them, *Sheol* in Hebrew and *Hades* in Greek, name the place where the dead wait. A third, *Gehenna*, is the name of a real valley outside Jerusalem. The fourth is used once, of angels. Alongside those sit several more phrases: outer darkness, the furnace of fire, the abyss, the lake of fire, the second death.

Picture a road map where four different towns have all been stamped with the same name. You could study it for years and never find your way. That is what happened to "hell." The translators used one English word for all of it, and even the modern versions that brought back "Hades" kept "hell" for the rest. "Heaven" got the same treatment: one word for three realms.

So the work here is sorting, and one rule runs through all of it: **the judgment words never name an address.** Scripture never uses Gehenna, outer darkness, the lake of fire, or the second death for a spot on a map. They describe judgment and separation from God, the same way for everyone they're applied to.

Three heavens

Paul was "caught up to the third heaven" (2 Cor. 12:2), which only makes sense if there is a first and a second.

The **first heaven** is the sky, where the birds fly (Gen. 1:20). The **third heaven** is God's own dwelling and throne (Matt. 5:34; Ps. 103:19). The **second heaven** sits between them, unseen, over the earth. There Paul places "spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12), and from there Satan rules as "the prince of the power of the air" (Eph. 2:2). He was given that throne (Ezek. 28:14), reached for God's own and never got it (Isa. 14:13-14), and still holds the one he was given.

That realm is what the Church is called to. Christ promises the overcomer authority over the nations and a share of His own throne (Rev. 2:26-27; 3:21), which is a promise to rule where someone else rules now.

Fire belongs to God

Fire runs through nearly every word below, so it comes first.

Fire, in Scripture, belongs first to God Himself. "Our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29). The image describes what He is. It is His holiness at work, and what that work does depends on what it touches.

The same sun that melts wax hardens clay. The sun doesn't change; what lies under it does. Isaiah puts it this way:

> "'Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?' He who walks righteously and speaks uprightly..." (Isa. 33:14-15)

The righteous man is the one who *lives* in the everlasting burnings.

So the fire is not a place the wicked are sent while the righteous escape it. Daniel's furnace shows how it works. Three men are thrown in bound. The soldiers who threw them in are killed by the heat, while the three walk inside it with a fourth figure beside them and come out without even the smell of fire on them. The only thing that burned was what had them tied (Dan. 3:19-27).

What "death" means

English hears "death" as a heart stopping. Scripture means something else, and it says so the first time it uses the word. God told Adam, "in the day that you eat of it [the tree of the knowledge of good and evil] you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:17). Adam ate, and he went on breathing for centuries.

What happened that day shows in what he did next: when God came walking in the garden, Adam hid (Gen. 3:8-10). **Death is separation from God.** A branch cut from a tree stays green for days. It looks alive, but it's already cut off, and the withering is only a matter of time. *Physical* dying is the withering. The cutting happened in Eden, and every man since has been born cut off (Rom. 5:12).

That death reaches all three parts of the man: spirit, soul, and body. Salvation reverses it one part at a time. At initial salvation a man's spirit is made alive (Eph. 2:5), and that is settled for good (Rom. 11:29). His soul is still being worked out; Peter speaks of "the salvation of your souls" as something still being received (1 Pet. 1:9). His body still waits for its redemption (Rom. 8:23). **A Christian is finished with a third of death.** The rest of it is still ahead of him.

Sheol and Hades: where the dead wait

Sheol and *Hades* are one place under two names. At Pentecost Peter quotes David's line about Sheol and says Hades in its place (Ps. 16:10; Acts 2:27). The Greek word means "the unseen."

It is a **waiting room, not a destination**. The way in is physical dying: the body goes into the ground and the soul goes down. Jacob, believing his son was dead, expected to go there mourning (Gen. 37:35). Jesus Himself went there when He died, and His death shows the three parts of a man coming apart. His spirit went to the Father (Luke 23:46), His body to a tomb (Luke 23:53), and His soul to Hades: "His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption" (Acts 2:31). If Hades were a place of punishment, the sinless Son of God could not have gone there.

The redeemed leave it when "the dead in Christ will rise first" (1 Thess. 4:16). The rest stay until the last resurrection, and then Hades is emptied and done away with (Rev. 20:13-14).

The rich man and Lazarus

Much of the popular picture of hell comes from Luke 16:19-31: the flames, the great gulf, the plea refused. The first question is what kind of story it is.

It is a **parable**. It opens "There was a certain rich man," the same words that open the parable just before it (Luke 16:1), and the way Luke opens parable after parable (Luke 10:30; 12:16; 14:16; 15:11). Jesus tells it to the Pharisees who had just sneered at Him over money (Luke 16:14).

Its lesson is the one He had been pressing all along: a kingdom was being offered to Israel, and some were receiving it while others refused. He said it elsewhere with no story at all:

> "I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Matt. 8:11-12)

Some are seated with Abraham and some are put outside, and every word of it is about who enters the kingdom.

So in the parable **Abraham's bosom stands for *life* and Hades for *death***, both belonging to the age Jesus was offering. The rich man is still a son of Abraham; Abraham calls him "Son" (Luke 16:25). What he lost was what was on offer.

Notice what he is never accused of. He doesn't drive Lazarus away or mock him. He eats well inside while a hungry man lies at his gate, and the food never travels the few feet between them. That is a hard picture for anyone who holds the word of the kingdom and keeps it to himself. **And every man listening that day still had time not to be him.**

Gehenna, outer darkness, and weeping

Gehenna is the Valley of Hinnom, just outside Jerusalem, where Israelites burned their own children in the fire (2 Chron. 28:3; Jer. 7:31). The popular idea that it was the city's smoldering garbage dump has no ancient source behind it. Jesus used the valley's name the way someone today might say a reckless choice leads to Chernobyl. Nobody hears that and books a flight to Ukraine.

He always sets Gehenna against *inheriting the kingdom*, never against being saved. Matthew records the warning in two sentences back to back: "to be cast into the everlasting [age-lasting] fire," and then "to be cast into hell [Gehenna] fire" (Matt. 18:8-9). One fire, two names.

Outer darkness means "the darkness outside." Picture a wedding reception at night: the hall lit, the music going, and a guest put out the door into the dark, near enough to still hear it (Matt. 22:13).

Weeping and gnashing of teeth appears seven times, and it always lands on insiders: sons of the kingdom, servants of the master, people who ate and drank in Jesus' presence (Matt. 8:12; 24:51;

25:30; Luke 13:26-28). It is the sound of grief over a kingdom not received, because of unfaithfulness.

The lake of fire

Revelation sets two pictures against each other. Out of the throne of God and of the Lamb flows "a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal" (Rev. 22:1), and across from it lies a *lake* of *fire*. A river moves; a lake sits still. Water gives life; fire consumes.

One thing doesn't flip. John never puts the lake anywhere away from that throne; the man who worships the beast is tormented "in the presence of the Lamb" (Rev. 14:10). The contrast is **one throne, met by two kinds of men**: a river to the man who can drink from it, a fire to the man with nothing in him that can stand the nearness. Like Adam in the garden, a man can be in God's presence and cut off from Him at the same time.

Is the lake literal? The safest answer is that **it is real, and it is pictured**, and even that is held loosely. The men cast in at the end are raised first (Rev. 20:12-15), so they meet it in a body. But it also takes in Death and Hades, which aren't bodies at all, and it is still receiving the dead after the present earth and heaven have fled (Rev. 20:11, 14-15). It is not made of this creation.

And it is **one fire under several names**. "The everlasting [age-lasting] fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41) is the same fire Jesus warned His own disciples about in Matthew 18.

The second death is a second name

"The second death" sounds like dying twice. John names it himself: "the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (Rev. 21:8). **The second death is another name for the lake of fire.**

That clears up a strange verse: "Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death" (Rev. 20:14). Death is thrown into death. What goes in is the *first* death, the one Adam passed down, which Paul calls "the last enemy that will be destroyed" (1 Cor. 15:26).

The two work differently. Adam was driven out of the garden, and every child after him was born outside it without ever standing trial (Gen. 3:23-24). That is the first death, a condition a man is born into. Nobody is born into the second. A man comes to be in it by a verdict pronounced on him by name, at a throne (Rev. 20:12-15), and destroying the first death does nothing to that verdict.

Several judgments, and what each one decides

Scripture describes **several judgments**, held at different times for different people (2 Cor. 5:10; Matt. 25:31-32; Ezek. 20:34-38; Rev. 20:11-15), rather than one day with everyone who ever lived standing in a single line.

Every judgment held before Christ's kingdom begins is a judgment of men already made alive in spirit (Eph. 2:5), because only they are in a position to enter that kingdom. What's decided there is entrance or exclusion, and degree within it, according to what each man did (Luke 19:17-19). The rest of the dead aren't raised until the thousand years are finished (Rev. 20:5), and only then are they judged. John sees God seated on "a great white throne," and the dead "standing before God" (Rev. 20:11-12). That is the scene often called the Great White Throne judgment, and it is God who judges there.

For the Christian, that judgment is the Judgment Seat of Christ, and Paul describes it with fire:

> "...the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire." (1 Cor. 3:13-15)

Fire, a real loss, and a man who comes through it saved.

That is the fire the overcomer is promised he "shall not be hurt" by (Rev. 2:11). For the man who did not overcome, the hurt begins in the hearing, when his own Lord calls him "wicked and lazy" (Matt. 25:26), and it does not end there.

What an unfaithful Christian loses

So where does an unfaithful Christian *go*? None of these words is an address, so ask instead what he loses. In a word, **the inheritance**. Paul warns brethren that those who practice the works of the flesh "will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal. 5:21). An inheritance is what an heir receives; it isn't what makes him an heir. The unfaithful Christian is still God's child. What he forfeits is what a son was meant to receive.

He does not rule. Reigning in the coming kingdom is promised to overcomers: "If we endure, we shall also reign with Him" (2 Tim. 2:12). In that age Israel rules on the earth and the Church in the heavens, so a redeemed man who doesn't rule isn't somewhere else. He's among the ruled. Think of a son who was meant to run the family business. He is still family, and nobody disowns him, but his brothers run the company now and he works under them.

He is not whole. His spirit is alive and was never at risk. But the salvation of his soul, the life belonging to that age, was on the table, and he forfeited it. His body is not redeemed either, because soul and body go together. He spends the thousand years divided against himself.

He is outside the light. He hears "Enter into the joy of your lord" spoken to another servant, and then he is put out into the dark beyond the doors (Matt. 25:21, 30).

Paul did not treat this lightly. He disciplined his own body so that he would not be disqualified (1 Cor. 9:27).

And after that age

For the unsaved, the separation goes on into the ages past the kingdom (Rev. 20:15). For the unfaithful Christian the loss is real, and it is also bounded. It belongs to an age, and the age ends.

Peter gives the measure: "with the Lord one day is as a thousand years" (2 Pet. 3:8). Six days of work and a seventh of rest frame the whole story, and the thousand-year kingdom is **the seventh day**. What comes after, Peter calls "the day of God," with "new heavens and a new earth" (2 Pet. 3:12-13). By count it is **an eighth day**, and Scripture never says how long it runs.

At the close of the kingdom, death itself is thrown into the lake (Rev. 20:14). The unfaithful Christian's soul and body were still under the death he was born with, and once that death is destroyed, nothing is left to keep him separated. **He gets his life back.** What he lost was his place in the seventh day, and that day does not come around again.

Past that, Scripture says less, and *presume* is the right word for what follows. Of the day of God John writes, "His servants shall serve Him.... And they shall reign forever and ever [unto the ages of the ages]" (Rev. 22:3, 5). The presumption is that every one of the redeemed is there when God dwells with men (Rev. 21:3), made whole.

What this is not

This is not losing your salvation. The penalty for sin was settled once, and the spirit's verdict was closed the moment a man believed (Rom. 11:29). Nothing at the Judgment Seat reopens it. What is at stake there is the kingdom and the salvation of the soul.

This is not "only a symbol." A picture names something real, and these pictures were chosen because what they name is hard to look at: a valley where a nation burned its children, a lit hall with the door shut behind you.

This is not a second hell for Christians. The loss runs the length of one age and ends when death itself ends. It is a real loss, and a bounded one.

Why this matters

The single word "hell" has hidden something. Most of the New Testament's warnings about fire and darkness are aimed at Christ's own servants, about losing what they were made for. Read as threats about a location, they're easy to file under someone else's name. Read as written, they're about the people listening.

The fire is the same for everyone. The question is what it will find.

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.