



Are there different 'levels' in heaven - and hell?

This question came during our new Sunday morning Forum study: *Faith under Fire*. The study takes a 'Point-Counterpoint'-style look at topics where popular culture and God's Word clash. Heaven and hell were both topics we looked at this past month. The consensus of the popular culture is that 'everyone is going to heaven' and that 'there really is no such thing as hell.' Obviously both ideas are far from biblical.

God's Word is very clear on both subjects. Jesus did indeed take the punishment for all sin, making it *possible* for everyone to be forgiven and enter God's presence for eternity (i.e. heaven). But only those who admit that they need a Savior from sin and trust in Jesus as that Savior actually accept what Jesus did for them. Heaven is comparable to a gift that someone purchased for you and delivered to you. You only reap the benefits of that gift if you accept it, open it and use it. Those who never repent of their sin and trust in Jesus have, in effect, rejected the gift and left it unopened. Heaven was available to them, but they chose to reject it.

The Bible is also clear that there definitely is a place of eternal torment and suffering spent separated from the presence of God, and thus separated from anything good. We call that place 'hell.' Real people end up there - not just your mass-murderer types. People who saw no need for Jesus in this life will get what they chose for eternity: Life without Jesus.

But what about the question of differing levels of bliss in heaven and differing levels of punishment in hell? Here's the answer from the lcms.org FAQ section.

In its report on The "End Times," the Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations says regarding hell: "In both "body and soul" unbelievers will suffer eternal separation and condemnation in hell (Matt 18:8; 25:46; Mark 9:43; John 3:36; 2 Thess. 1:9; Jude 13; Rev. 14:11).[40] Indescribable torment will be experienced consciously, *the degree determined by the nature of the sins to be punished* (Matt. 11:20-24; 23:15; Luke 12:47-48)."

Regarding heaven and "degrees of glory" the Commission says: "Eternal life is pictured in the Scriptures as a state of never-ending "blessedness." This means, on the one hand, that Christians will live forever in perfect freedom from sin, death, and every evil (Is. 25:8; 49:10; 1 Cor. 15:26, 55-57; Rev. 2:7, 11; 20:14; 21:4). At the same time, they will experience the unending joy of being with God in the new heavens and new earth (e.g., Revelation 21-22; Ps. 16:11). Forever eliminated is the possibility of falling away from God. This blessedness will bring with it the joy of being in eternal communion with fellow believers, whom we have reason to believe we shall recognize (cf. Matt. 17:3). And, there will be no limitations or degrees attached to the enjoyment of the happiness to be experienced, *though there will be degrees of glory corresponding to differences of work and fidelity here on earth, producing praise to God but no envy* (see 2 Cor. 9:6; Matt. 20:23)

Thanks for asking,
Pastor David

Send your questions to <mailto:pastor@livingwordlutheran.net>