Heaven and Hell

A triangle, a worm no one squishes, and a feast on the mountain

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, August 28, 2022
PASSAGES	Mark 9:42-48; Matthew 25:31-46; Isaiah 66:24; Jeremiah 7:32-33; Ezekiel 20:45-48; Isaiah 25:6-9; Revelation 19:6-8; Revelation 7:9-12; Luke 20:34-36; Psalm 16:11; Revelation 21:1-4
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:00:05 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

If we say Jesus saves, we should be able to answer "saved from what?" — and the answer is best learned from Scripture read in its Old Testament context, not absorbed from pop culture. Hell is God's unstoppable judgment on his enemies; heaven is God finally dwelling with his people. Either way, the Judge can be trusted.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Sheol and Hades are the realm of the dead generally. "Hell" here means the final end of the unredeemed; "heaven" means the new heavens and the new earth.
- Christians have historically held three views of final judgment — traditionalism, conditionalism and universalism — and no one can logically agree with all three sides of the triangle.
- How we treat Christ's brothers and sisters reveals our relationship with Christ. You cannot love Jesus and hate his people.
- Hell as "just your spirit," hell "locked from the inside," and Satan running a rival kingdom are popular ideas the Bible does not teach.
- The worm that does not die and the unquenchable fire come from the end of Isaiah: God defeating his enemies in a battle no one can stop.
- Heaven in Scripture is a throne room and a wedding feast, not a tourism guide: death swallowed up, every tear wiped away, God with his people.

- We botch justice every time; he never misses. And his presence is already offered to us now, as a down payment.

▶ 1:00:05

For about a year Hope has been studying the major figures and events of the Bible. Last week was the second coming, when Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead. This week Matt took the last step: heaven and hell.

Saved from what?

▶ 1:01:21

Talking about Jesus with strangers, Matt has been asked: saved *from what*? For years he avoided the subject and "just stuffed it in my subconscious." The answer is not cartoons with little red devils, *The Good Place* or Dante's *Inferno* — "none of these things are technically the Bible, no matter how engaging they may be."

▶ 1:03:05

He wanted to offer what he had always struggled to find. Much writing on hell, he said, is lazy: a passage, no excavation of the Old Testament behind it, what the author thinks, then a quote from C.S. Lewis. "A passage — oh, there's C.S. Lewis again."

Getting the vocabulary straight

▶ 1:04:09

Sheol is Hebrew for the realm of the dead, where Abraham, Isaac and Jacob expected to go. The Greek equivalent is *Hades*. In the parable of the rich man and the poor man (Luke 16:19–31) both end up in Hades, in a good part and a bad part. But Hades is temporary: in Revelation it is emptied of its dead and thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:13–14).

▶ 1:05:51

Matt deliberately did not build on Revelation. Everywhere else we know what to do with visions: Pharaoh's cows from the Nile are years, not cannibalistic cows (Genesis 41:25–27). His advice: highlight what an angel, God or John explains, "otherwise don't hold too tight, because I don't think it's a DVD sent back into the past of the future."

The hell triangle

▶ 1:08:08

Matt showed a diagram from the evangelical ministry Rethinking Hell: three views held throughout church history.

▶ 1:09:09

Traditionalism (eternal conscious torment): the wicked are made immortal to undergo torment by fire forever, so "the wages of sin is death" is a metaphor. **Conditionalism** (conditional immortality): only the redeemed receive immortality; the unredeemed suffer capital punishment, body and soul, a death that lasts forever — the wages of sin is death literally. **Universalism** (*apokatastasis*): because of Jesus alone — not because all religions are equal — all people eventually come to repentance and rest.

▶ 1:11:45

Each side of the triangle is where two views agree against the third. Traditionalists and universalists say all people are immortal; universalists and conditionalists say evil is finally eradicated, not merely restrained; traditionalists and conditionalists say judgment is final. "Logically, you can't agree with all the legs."

Matthew 25, around the triangle

▶ 1:13:23

> "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats."
>
> MATTHEW 25:31–46 ↗

▶ 1:14:48

Jesus says "the least of these *my brothers*" — his concern for the brethren is in view. And this fits salvation by grace through faith: how you treat your brother in Christ reveals your relationship to Christ. Many think you can love Jesus and hate Christians. "Jesus in this scariest of passages is saying that's not possible."

▶ 1:16:26

Then: "these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." A traditionalist reads conscious torment lasting forever, parallel to eternal life. A universalist reads a permanent mark

of shame, noting the Greek can mean "of that age" — though then, Matt said, it is hard to explain why it is set against eternal life. A conditionalist reads death, the opposite of life, noting that "eternal" usually describes an outcome, as with Christ's "eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:12): he died once, and the redemption lasts forever.

▶ 1:18:27

Every camp is "dead certain that the early church was their view," largely because early Christians used biblical language, and anyone quoting the Bible sounds like they are on your side. "Do the homework."

Ideas about hell that aren't in the Bible

▶ 1:19:56

Whatever your view, Matt named beliefs he considers unbiblical. That it is "just your spirit," like a ghost: every historic view involves body and soul. That hell is "locked from the inside" while God watches — which invites the atheist's comeback, "then I just won't go." In every judgment passage God decides the outcome; people are told to depart.

▶ 1:21:31

That the damned keep sinning and racking up punishment: if judgment is already eternal, who is counting? In every view evil is subdued — "the way of the wicked will perish." And that Satan runs a rival kingdom. "God is the ultimate king. He wears all the crowns." Satan is not handed land and keys; he is a subject of the punishment.

Speaking in biblical language

▶ 1:23:30

So Matt has resolved to be "a servant to my passages" rather than to a systematic theology. The unredeemed suffer destruction (Philippians 1:28) and extinction (2 Peter 2:6); the alternative to eternal life is to perish (John 3:16); the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). The lake of fire represents "the second death," a phrase found repeatedly in the Aramaic Targums. His YouTube series *Every Verse on Hell* works through them at length.

Mark 9: the worm and the fire

▶ 1:25:36

Then he modelled the homework on one popular passage.

> "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire… It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'"
>
> MARK 9:42–48 ↗

▶ 1:26:38

"We are so into self-esteem and self-preservation, but Jesus does not seem to care that much." But notice the quotation marks in verse 48. Jesus is quoting the last chapter of Isaiah, where the Lord comes like a warrior "in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind" to put his enemies to death — "it's really heavy metal" — and all flesh comes to worship before him:

> "And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh."
>
> ISAIAH 66:24 ↗

"The mother lode of context for the New Testament is not your systematic theology, but it's the Old Testament."

▶ 1:28:30

Jeremiah describes the same battle at Topheth, the Valley of the Son of Hinnom — contract the Hebrew and you get *Gehenna*:

> "It will no more be called Topheth, or the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter… And the dead bodies of this people will be food for the birds of the air, and for the beasts of the earth, and none will frighten them away."
>
> JEREMIAH 7:32–33 ↗

▶ 1:29:30

Instead of a fire you cannot put out, birds and beasts you cannot scare away — the same function. Why this valley? It was where Israel sank into its worst idolatry, burning its children alive. And the Lord's slain "shall not be lamented, or gathered, or buried" (Jeremiah 25:33).

▶ 1:30:24

"Unquenchable fire" is Old Testament language too. Against a forest, the Lord says, "I will kindle a fire in you… The blazing flame shall not be quenched" (Ezekiel 20:45–48). Not a forest burning forever — a fire no one can stop. Like an unstoppable tank: it still has a parking brake, but when it is in drive and coming at you, "you can't do nothing about it."

▶ 1:31:42

And the worm? The Hebrew says simply "will not die," the phrase Jacob used sending his sons for grain "that we may live and not die" (Genesis 42:2). Egyptian grain was not going to make them immortal. The worm keeps eating, and no one squishes it.

▶ 1:32:27

So Jesus draws on a long prophetic tradition in which God, in a final battle, kills his enemies and denies them burial — and says if cutting something out of your life avoids that, do it. Better to enter life maimed "than to engage in battle with one that no one can stop."

A feast on the mountain

▶ 1:33:00

Heaven is hard to preach for a similar reason: most glimpses are throne-room business, not "a heaven tourism guide." When Paul says no eye has seen (1 Corinthians 2:9–10), Matt said, he means human imagination does not compare to revelation — and revelation says far more about God's rule than about our leisure time.

▶ 1:34:04

> "On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine… He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces… 'Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us… let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.'"
>
> ISAIAH 25:6–9 ↗

▶ 1:35:16

Matt counted it out: a feast for all peoples; death swallowed up forever; comfort spearheaded by God himself, the great comforter and rescuer; and guests rejoicing because they are finally with the one they waited for. That, he believes, stands behind the marriage supper of the Lamb:

▶ 1:36:33

> "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready."
>
> REVELATION 19:6–8 ↗

▶ 1:37:08

Then Revelation 7:9–12: a multitude no one could number, from every nation, in white robes with palm branches. "Does that remind you of any stories?" It is the crowd receiving Jesus into Jerusalem — not as a healer, but as king. Angels, elders and the four living creatures ("I'm not sure what to make of the four living creatures," Matt confessed) are all gathered around one figure: God.

Something more concrete

▶ 1:39:22

Jesus, answering a question about marriage, says those counted worthy of the resurrection "cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection" (Luke 20:34–36).

▶ 1:40:30

And beyond immortality, joy:
"in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore." Heaven's emphasis is not "really comfy sofas" but being with the Lord — so fullness of joy is there, because that is what is in his presence.

God dwelling with his people

▶ 1:41:01

Matt ended the year's journey here, because from Genesis on one refrain kept returning through the prophets: *I will be their God, they will be my people, and I will dwell in their midst.*

▶ 1:42:08

"The sea was no more" is an image, he told the surfers. In the ancient Near East the sea meant chaos and death; the Hebrew word for "the deep" is close to Tiamat, the chaos goddess of a neighbouring creation story. No more sea means no more enemies of God, no more places that churn you up and spit you out. "There might still be water."

▶ 1:43:18

Is the new Jerusalem a city or a bride? An image again: the city belongs to God and he dwells there; the bride belongs to him and dwells with him. A vision of union — and the climax of one of Scripture's most important themes:

▶ 1:44:33

> "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."
>
> REVELATION 21:1–4 ↗

"Here it is. He's doing it finally. Nothing left for a future age — it's fulfilled." His enemies are gone, his people belong to him like a bride, and he dwells with them.

You can trust the Judge

▶ 1:45:07

This is a matter of hope. If the afterlife makes you nervous, study it — but remember you can trust God. No hypothetical catches him off guard, including the favourite "what if" about the man on the island who never heard. Jesus told the towns that saw his miracles that Sodom would have repented (Matthew 11:20–24): God has what Matt called conditional knowledge: he knows who would repent under what circumstances.

▶ 1:46:14

So we fret over where the "finish line" is. "Bro, finish line shminish line. He already knows." That is a human adaptation to our limits and anxieties. Matt pictured the church arriving at the final chapter with note cards of tips for the Lord on the judgment — "sorry, that's dumb."

▶ 1:47:15

Like an epic film you rewatch, God's just judgments will be something you never want to stop looking at; your sense of justice will be satisfied in ways you cannot yet imagine. "God is not dumb, and we are not better than him, so we can trust him." We execute justice and botch it every time. "He never misses."

▶ 1:48:38

Heaven is about being with him — which, Matt closed, we can already taste as a down payment, because he is humble enough to be with us now. “Yes, long for his new creation — but also long for his presence now, which he generously gives to us.”

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- Luke 16:19–31
- Revelation 20:13–14
- Genesis 41:25–27
- Matthew 25:31–46
- Hebrews 9:12
- Psalm 1:6
- Philippians 1:28
- 2 Peter 2:6
- John 3:16
- Romans 6:23
- Mark 9:42–48
- Isaiah 66:24
- Jeremiah 7:32–33
- Jeremiah 25:33
- Ezekiel 20:45–48
- Genesis 42:2
- 1 Corinthians 2:9–10
- Isaiah 25:6–9
- Revelation 19:6–8
- Revelation 7:9–12
- Luke 20:34–36
- Psalm 16:11
- Revelation 21:1–4
- Matthew 11:20–24

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Where did your picture of heaven and hell come from — Scripture, funerals, cartoons, books — and how did this message test it?
2. Jesus says how we treat his brothers and sisters reveals our relationship with him. Who in the church is hardest for you to love, and what does Matthew 25 ask of you?
3. Which of the popular ideas Matt called unbiblical had you absorbed, and what changes if you set it aside?
4. Jesus says it is better to enter life maimed than to face an enemy no one can stop. What might he be asking you to cut out of your life?
5. Matt called God's presence now a down payment on the new creation. How will you seek that presence this week?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_cpn5KQ-LDk&t=3605s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.