

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

PART 23 – END OF THE AGES

DISCUSS AND APPLY

Discuss – questions to help understanding

1. What is your impression of heaven? Is it somewhere you would like to live eternally?

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

2. Why would Paul expect the Christians to find his words in 4:13-12 encouraging in the face of grief over the death of fellow-believers?
3. Like the coming of a thief, the date of Jesus' return will not be announced in advance (5:1-3), but Christians should be ready when it happens (5:4-8). What does this mean for how Christians should live?
4. What will the return of Christ mean for those who believe in Him and, by implication, for those who do not (5:9-11)?

Read 2 Peter 3:8-14

5. Why is God allowing time to pass before the final day of the Lord?
6. What will the day of the Lord mean for the physical universe and where will Christians live forever?
7. What are the implications for how we should live now?

Apply – questions to help personal application

- What do you believe happens after death? Have you always believed the same thing? What were you brought up to believe and when did you change your mind?
- The New Testament presents the resurrection of Jesus as the proof that all those who believe in Him will one day be raised in new bodies. What is wrong with our present bodies and what needs to change?
- Do you struggle with the idea that God will judge everyone fairly according to what they have done? What would this mean for you if it weren't for Jesus? What do we deserve from God?
- The main images of Heaven in the Bible are that it is living in peace with God and enjoying a life free of the results of sin. Why is this very good news and how does knowing it change our lives now?
- The Bible says that those who believe in Jesus will not face God's condemnation and will not end up in hell. Do you believe in Jesus? Take time to give thanks to God that you share in Jesus' inheritance in glory.

Is hell literally a place of fire?

Fire is the predominant image that is used in the biblical accounts of the final judgement. It is difficult to say whether this should be understood literally as it may, rather, be figurative of the emotional anguish people will experience. Christians differ over whether the second death means eternal conscious punishment (the predominant view) or annihilation (some argue that those consigned to hell cease to exist). There are verses that could be interpreted in either of these ways. What is, however, clear from Scripture is that the final judgement is irreversible and the destination is eternal. There is no coming back.

Is hell a choice people make for themselves?

Some preachers and authors describe hell as a place that people have chosen to be. It certainly seems true to say that hell was not created for people, but for Satan and his angels who rebelled against God. It would, however, be wrong to think that people consign themselves to Hell or that God simply allows them to go there because they have chosen it. People will be in hell because of their own sin and their rejection of God's salvation, but the verdict of eternal punishment is pronounced by God. For now, God allows people to follow their sinful desires and because of His patience He permits people to reject Him so that some will return to Him in repentance. When Christ returns, however, God will call a halt to all human rebellion and no one will escape His judgement. He will expose everything and will preside in the judgement. In Scripture, sin is always personal (an offence against God) and so is judgement.

Isn't there a place called purgatory?

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that there is a third option between heaven and hell, named purgatory. This is believed to be a place where people who are not good enough to go directly to heaven but not bad enough to be condemned to hell can go for a period of time until they are purged of their sins. It is said to be a place of punishment while these people perform penance for their sins and the prayers of people who are still alive on earth are said to help shorten its duration. This teaching finds no basis in Scripture and is a development from a flawed idea of salvation. The Bible describes only heaven (the new earth) and hell (the lake of fire). The former is the destiny of those whose names are written in the book of life – those who have received God's offer of life through Christ – and the latter is the destiny of those who have not responded in faith to God.

What will our new bodies and the new earth be like?

It is best to avoid speculation about the nature of our new bodies and the new heaven. We do know that there will be no sickness or suffering on the new earth (Revelation 21:4) and that our new bodies will be incapable of corruption, glorious and powerful (1 Corinthians 15:42-44). We also know that there will be no marriage or procreation in the new creation (Matthew 22:30). Jesus relates this to being like the angels, which may mean that our new bodies will not be gendered, although we cannot be certain of this. The new earth will likely be similar to the present earth and will, presumably, include many species of plants and animals. Whether these are the same as or different from those existing currently remains to be seen.

Will heaven not get boring after a while?

The idea that heaven will be boring stems from a misunderstanding of what it will be like. If it meant sitting around forever on clouds strumming harps, that probably would be boring, especially if you don't like harp music! When we realise, however, that we will live in new bodies in a restored universe, the possibilities are endless. We will engage in work and will have dominion over creation, but this will not be laborious, but rather productive and fulfilling. Above all, we will be in God's presence, enjoying Him for ever, and since He is eternal and infinite there will always be more to discover and to appreciate.