

Catholicism 101

The Last Things: Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory

No subject in religion bears more weight in media and the lives of people than the promise of rewards or the pain of punishment. The ideas surrounding Heaven and Hell have captivated minds and led to great works of art. Yet, they still remain a mystery. What happens after death? Should we be excited or afraid? What pull does this life have on our afterlife? What role does God play in the things to come? All of the questions are answered if not pondered by the revelations given by Jesus and the lives of the saints.

Judgement:

After our lives on Earth have concluded, the next step is the judgment. Some argue that we not judged but instead have already been determined as to our eternal existence. This mentality is called pre-destination. The idea of pre-destination arose in the high Middle Ages following the advent of Protestantism. The main idea behind it is that God already knows our choices and has already made his decision. Therefore some people are already destined for Heaven beyond their choice and some are destined for Hell and cannot change that path. Although this idea solves some minor issues regarding God's knowledge and eternal vision, it completely degrades our free-will and makes our lives completely meaningless. The Church teaches that pre-destination is against the Christian message for it makes God unjust.

The next level of judgement is the belief that after our deaths, we are judged by God and immediately sent to either Heaven or Hell. This judgment is a mix of our good deeds and the choice to accept God into our lives. The basic thought is that after death we go before the judgement seat of God who examines our lives. Then God makes a verdict on whether we have done enough good deeds or followed his laws well enough to merit Heaven. This idea has several major problems. The first, and most glaring, is that our faith is meaningless. We are judged strictly on our deeds and nothing else. The second problem is that we have no say in the matter. God makes the decision for us and we are sent to Heaven or Hell beyond our desire or choosing. Why would God want to send someone to Heaven who doesn't want to be there? The third problem is that Jesus is not part of this event. The whole reason why Jesus came to Earth and died on a Cross was to be our advocate and open an avenue for us to go to Heaven even though we have sinned and not done the good we were supposed to. Jesus needs to be a significant part of this judgment process.

But what does the Church teach? The Church teaches that upon our deaths, we will have two types of judgements called the particular judgement and the universal judgment. The particular judgement is a judgment for each individual person. We go before God, our lives are reviewed, and then we are given a choice. I want to emphasize this last point: we are given a choice. We have the option, having reviewed our lives, to either accept God and his mercy or reject him. Notice the details. This isn't just a choice of accepting God into our lives. This is a choice of accepting God **and** his mercy. Without God's mercy, Heaven is not a possibility. We need his mercy to enter into Heaven, thus the importance of Jesus. Jesus is our greatest source of God's mercy and our greatest advocate who pleads for us against the crimes we have committed. He

wants us to be in Heaven with him. Thus, our lives take on a special meaning as the process of coming to know Jesus, accept him into our lives, want his mercy, and be ready for this judgment. The choice between accepting and rejecting God is very important. If we do not accept God, Heaven is meaningless and becomes a Hell. If we reject God, we have already put ourselves in Hell. Thus Heaven is for those who want God, desire him, and want his mercy.

The universal judgment is very different. At the end of time, God will judge the entire universe and decide its fate. Recall: the entire universe was affected by the Original Sin of Adam and Eve. Everything in the created order had turned away from God and went after their own self-interests. Therefore, the whole universe needs to be judged as defiant of God's ways and sinful so that it can be restored and healed. The goal of the universal judgment is to condemn the universe so that it can be healed and restored to the goodness in which God created it to be.

Purgatory:

Purgatory is the state of the soul on track for Heaven but needing some healing before being able to fully experience the joys of Heaven. After we die, few of us are detached enough from the effects of sin to fully experience Heaven. We either have some lingering sins, some effects from previous sins, or are holding on to things from our earthly existence and need to be cleansed of them. Purgatory is our last opportunity to be completely free from sin.

Does purgatory exist? Catholics frequently get asked this question. Those who do not accept purgatory argue that it is not biblical and counters Jesus' death of the Cross as bringing universal forgiveness. Purgatory is neither of these. The biblical evidence for purgatory is challenging. Conversely, the biblical evidence for what we call Hell is also challenging. Jesus mentions several times the burning fires that await us in the life to come. What are these fires? Some argue that they are Hell. When Jesus says, "where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth," are the best examples of Hell since the people clearly are upset by it. But Jesus also mentions that the burning fires will burn away the refuse and old stuff. The best evidence for purgatory comes from the Book of Revelation and logic. The Book of Revelation pictures the end times as a series of events working for the conversion of all people. The people who are most obstinate suffer the greatest pains and punishments compared to those who accept God. Yet, this image reminds us that God wants us to be saved. Herein lies our greatest problem. If God gave us two options – Heaven and Hell, how many would be saved? Probably very few because most people are not ready for Heaven upon their death. Many people want God but are not ready for the full glories of Heaven. If God condemned or saved, then he would be just. Those who wanted and deserved Heaven would get it and those who did not would be sent to Hell. But then what did Jesus come for? Jesus' ministry was about mercy and God giving us a second chance. Thus, at our judgment, God's mercy would give us a way to be healed, forgiven, and restored so as to be ready for Heaven. Thus purgatory. Purgatory holds in proper tension the mercy and justice of God. The remnants of our punishments due to our sins that we were not willing to allow God to heal or that needed extra healing are healed. Thus we can be fully and completely free from everything that attached us to sin. Note: the most important detail about purgatory is that those in purgatory will be in Heaven. Purgatory is the preparation step for Heaven not a holding place for judgment.

Some argue that the idea of purgatory denies the effects of Jesus' death and Resurrection. Namely, if purgatory exists, then Jesus did not save us from our sins. I understand their argument. From Jesus' words we should agree that Jesus' death and Resurrection provided the perfect forgiveness of sins and we are no longer affected by the effects of sin. This is true. Jesus didn't partially forgive our sins or only remove part of the punishment due to sin. He removed all of it. Purgatory isn't about Jesus' action of forgiving our sins. We have already been forgiven on those we confessed, those we wanted to be forgiven, and those we asked for forgiveness. We have other sins we missed, some we didn't know about, and some we were not willing at the time of our death to allow God to forgive. Purgatory is about our detachment from the world and sin and our preparation for entering into the life of God. Everyone in purgatory has already been freed from sin and experienced the effects of Jesus' forgiveness.

Hell

Hell is the state of the soul in which it completely rejects God. Note: Hell is a state of the soul. Hell is not a place. We cannot get in a starship and find Hell amongst the cosmos as many sci-fi shows propose. Hell is a state of the soul in its relation to God. A person can reject God in many different ways. The person can simply not care, not desire him, break too many laws to the point that mercy doesn't feel like an option, or be in direct defiance of God. Those who are in Hell live with their past sins and their feelings of rejecting God for all eternity. Dante in the *Divine Comedy* makes a point to express the particular punishment due to specific sins as emphasis on this point. Yet, the punishments in Hell are greater than we tend to imagine. Often we think of Hell as a place separate from Heaven. It is and it is not. Those in Hell cannot escape God. They live in the constant feeling of God's love being poured upon them but they have completely rejected it. Thus the fires of Hell are the fires of God's love that are warm and comforting for those in Heaven and painful for those in Hell.

Heaven:

Heaven is the state of the soul in which it is completely united to God. Note: Heaven is not a place much like Hell but a state of the soul. The soul no longer desires its own self-interests but God and God alone. The soul has no other desires than the praise and worship of God. This includes everything from wondering about creation to the central act of worship in Heaven. The joy of Heaven is to live in the fires of God's love and mercy and the feeling of God's forgiveness. Those in Heaven live in perfect relationship with each other and God.

Some argue that Heaven would not be joyful if someone you love was not in Heaven. They have a point but missed the basics of Heaven. Heaven is more joyous the more people who are in Heaven. We want each individual person to be in Heaven because that would cause the greatest joy. Yet, if we saw that someone we loved was burning in the fires of Hell, we would rejoice because God was just. God allowed that person to make the choice and they chose against God. We do not think about our relationships in the same way we do now. Now we feel we have choices, that people could change, that we expect certain behaviors. In Heaven we rejoice in God's justice and mercy even if that means that someone we cared about will be in Hell.

Do all people go to Heaven? Probably not. Some theologians have argued that God's plan would fail if even one person was not in Heaven. Not exactly. God wants all people to be in Heaven. If he wanted to ensure that all people were in Heaven, then he would not have given us free-will. The gift of free-will opens the possibility to choose against God and thus choose Hell. In the same way, the gift of free-will is the joy of Heaven. We chose God, we wanted God, and we gave ourselves to him in love and can continue to do so for eternity. God's goal was to open the possibility for Heaven and work to try to save as many as possible. God is not a failure if one person is condemned to Hell but a success if one person is saved, hence the parable of the Lost Sheep.

Do animals go to Heaven? The Church has not made a definitive statement on this question. The most common answer is kind of. God created the universe as good and wanted all creation to be saved, hence the universal judgment. Therefore, animals and plants will be in Heaven. Yet, our particular animals, i.e. pets, will probably not be in Heaven in the way we know them now. Instead all animals will be our pets and companions like the experience of Adam and Eve in the Garden.

What do we do in Heaven? The answer is simple: we praise and worship God. Most people assume that this would make Heaven boring and mundane and that they would rather not be in Heaven than to eternally worship God. For most of those people, I would agree with them on a few points. The way we currently worship God could easily get old and stale after a few centuries. But our worship of God in Heaven will be vibrant and exciting; it will be the greatest expression of our faith and the joy of God. We would want nothing else but to live in that experience. Additionally, part of our worship and praise of God is to explore his creation and come to understand the deeper truths of the universe, to come to know each other, and to glorify God in the many ways that he worked in their lives. Heaven is far more dynamic than we think with a lot of things to do which revolve around the worship of God.