Some of the Basics

1. If there is a just God, there must be a heaven. To believe in a future, endless, and human-populated heaven beyond the grave requires that one believe in a God who transcends all creation. The God of the Christian is a just God. And surely a just God creates a world designed for justice, but our world constantly reflects injustice. If this world is all there is, God must be unjust. But if God is just and this world ends for many without justice, this world will give way to a future world where all things will be right. This is the heaven hope that motivates so many of us and that gives us hope for those who have experienced horrifying injustices. The heaven hope believes God is just and, therefore, the just God will ultimately bring justice.

2. There is no heaven for Christians without the resurrection of Jesus. To believe in a future, endless, and human-populated heaven means death is not the final word. In the Christian heaven promise, there is one death-deeating moment: Easter. On Easter, God snapped the shackles of death, overpowered the death-dealing powers, and raised Jesus from the grave into eternal life. The entire heaven promise for Christians is based on that one day, that one morning, that one moment. Without the resurrection of Jesus, there is no heaven hope or heaven promise for Christians.

3. The best evidence of heaven is the resurrection of Jesus. To believe in a future, endless, and human-populated heaven means Christians will think about that heaven by examining the resurrected body of Jesus. It means heaven will be an embodied existence and not just a spirit-y or soul-y kind of ethereal, spiritual existence. It means heaven will include such things as eating (Jesus ate) and fellowship with those we know on earth (Jesus enjoyed fellowship with his disciples). The most common images for the Christian heaven are then not harps and wispy bodies, but a city, a banquet, and God in the middle of it all receiving worship.

4. Near-death and out-of-body experiences are unreliable guides. While it seems to be a new trend to believe in heaven because of stories of near-death experiences or out-of-body experiences, those who study these stories know the common features are defeated at times by differences. Reports about near-death experiences have been with us since the beginning of recorded history. Those reports tell us about what people believed before entering into that near-death experience. They are, after all, an experience of an already-existing and functioning brain, and what was in that brain is what is experienced as a person enters into that near-death experience. Since death by definition is medically or physically irreversible, near-death experiences are encounters not with what is beyond death but what is pre-death. Hence they don’t tell us about what happens after death, but what happens to the human brain as a person enters into the dying process. They are then unreliable guides to what lies beyond death and unreliable guides about heaven.

5. Heaven will be full of surprises:

a) The first hour. If God is just and heaven is about God making all things right, the “first hour” in heaven will be a time when all things are first made right. Realization of this ushers us into the essence of the Christian heaven promise: that first hour is when we will be made right with God, with ourselves, and with one another. That “first hour” in heaven will mean mass reconciliation at the deepest levels: realization of truth, reception of truth, and reconciliation with others in that truth. It will mean some kind of admission and confession and embrace of God and others as we experience grace and forgiveness and reconciliation. Heaven will not be heaven until that first hour of realization awakens us to God’s deep truths about God, ourselves, and our fellow humans. In the first hour in heaven our innermost life will be as clear to God and others as glass.

b) Who will be there? The Christian heaven promise, rooted as it is in a just God who will makes all things right, sometimes gets twisted into cajoling and coercing our fellow humans into doing this or saying that or confessing a set of lines and believing a few certain truths just so . . . or else! The more we focus on what we have to do to get into heaven, the more we miss the whole point: the heaven promise is not rooted in what we do, but in the resurrection of Jesus. So, when we ask who will be there, the only answer is “Jesus!” The Christian heaven promise presents a heaven where Jesus is in the center of
everything. So, heaven is designed for Jesus and all those who want to be connected to him. Heaven is not about what we do, but about who Jesus is.

c) What it will be like? Someone I know told me he hopes in heaven we won’t be aware of others; he said he hopes we will be so focused on God that everything else will fall away into non-existence. He was hoping not to meet up with some of his enemies and he feared they’d all be in heaven! He hoped it would some kind of eternal individualism. I reminded him that the vision of heaven in the Bible is not quite like that. Yes, God is central, but the image is not just of individuals absorbed in a beatific vision of ecstasy — it is of a thriving, flourishing city. If so, heaven will be a flourishing city centered on God, but still a society. The heaven promise means this: God created this world to work right; heaven will mean that world working right; this world is a society, not cells where individuals go at it alone.

6. Heaven is about our deepest happiness. The heaven promise lays before us the hope that we will experience joy and happiness at the deepest levels: in our love for God and for self and for others and for all that God has created. Our yearning and quest for joy and happiness and deep contentment is God’s gift to us now of what someday will be a settled and growing reality: we will be happy and grow happier and happier endlessly into the joy of God’s own joy. Heaven is about pleasure, our deepest pleasures, that will abound and abound into deeper pleasures.

7. Heaven will be more like our present earth than like the ethereal heaven found in so much Christian art and thinking. Unfortunately, for too long, Christians have imagined heaven in exclusively spiritual or spirit-y terms. That is, God designed us mostly as souls and these bodies of an encumbrance need to be shed like a lizard’s skin. Heaven is not wispy, but earthly. Jesus shows us that: his resurrected body was not a soul but a body. The heaven promise of the Bible starts not with bodiless souls or disembodied spirits but with embodied spirits and souls that identify who we are and how we are made. The heaven promise imagines a global fellowship that is more like a grand city — the New Jerusalem — than an ecstasy of spirit. The heaven promise means our bodies will function right, our social institutions and social forms will be right, and our society will be the way God designed it.

8. A heaven hope reshapes all of life. Another unfortunate element in the history of the church has been the occasional rise of the person who gets so enthused about the future heaven they become useless for life in the here and now. The heaven promise prepares us more for life now than anything that life provides. The heaven promise that makes us want to die is not the Christian heaven promise but something else — perhaps some kind of Platonism or Gnosticism. The heaven promise, since it is glimpsed in the resurrection body of Jesus and in the flourishing city, reveals to us the kind of future that makes a radical difference today. Those who most believe in the heaven promise are most prepared for a life of significance now. And to turn that around: those most committed to making the world right now are most in tune with the heaven promise.

So, “What happens when you die?”

This is an interesting question and I guess we can never be really 100% sure of the answer. I know that I can’t. I do know that we will all die. I know that death is a great mystery.

Theologian Tony Thiselton has what I think is a commendable approach, which he calls a “new approach” to this very question. He argues that in the history of the church Christians have favored one of two major interpretations: one argues the dead in Christ go immediately into the presence of Christ/God, and the other view argues that the dead in Christ enter into an intermediate state of deep sleep until the resurrection.

First, we need to observe that there is biblical evidence for each view.

Immediate: Philippians 1:23: “I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far...”; 2 Corinthians 5:6: “Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord.”

Intermediate: 1 Corinthians 15:52: “in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.” 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17: “For the
Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.”

Are we forced between two options? Do we have to choose? Thiselton contends we don’t. What we have here is different perspective depending on the difference between participant and observer.

Luther argued that the dead in Christ go into a deep sleep and don’t know anything until the resurrection. Furthermore, those who die in Christ are “in Christ,” so we can understand that isn’t an empty waiting room but instead an entrance into the realm over which Christ rules. Thiselton would argue that are “in” Christ and “with” Christ but not yet “conscious of being with Christ”.

Thus, he comes to this conclusion. For the dead in Christ, or existentially, the person immediately enters into the presence of Christ since that is how that person experiences the postmortem condition. But ontologically, or from the angle of the observer (the pastor, the family, the theologian), that person will be resurrected only at the Second Coming, the time at which that person (who has been sleeping/dead) becomes conscious of being with Christ. Thus, the language of both texts can be resolved through the difference between the participant and the observer.

Again, there are TWO prominent “teachings” in the Bible regarding what happens when we die:

1 – The dead in Jesus go immediately into the presence of Jesus. For the dead, the participant, whose life is “in Jesus”, that person immediately enters into the presence of Jesus – since that is how we, as participants, will experience death. That experience, obviously, is not a “bodily” existence...and therein lies the “issue” with this perspective – biblical anthropology is a holistic anthropology. There is no teaching in the Bible of a disembodied existence.

2 – The dead in Jesus enter into an “intermediate state” of deep sleep until the bodily resurrection on the “last day.” “Ontologically” (an examination of “being”), from the angle of the observer, the resurrection at the “final days” is when we all become conscious of being with Jesus. Think, as an example, of how sleep affects your consciousness – you do not know how long you have slept only that when you awake a “great” amount of time has passed. You have no idea of the expanse of the time because of your lack of awareness/consciousness.

Often people will point to Jesus’ words to the thief on the cross in the Gospels as “proof” of the “immediate” experience listed above. The “problem” with that view is that in Greek there are no punctuation marks. So, the verse could read:

“I tell you the truth today, you will be with me in paradise.”

“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Do you see the dilemma?

“Remember as a child when you were out visiting with parents somewhere and the hour grew late and you fell asleep in a strange place only to wake up in the morning in your own bed in your own room, you were carried there by a parent who loved you.” Peter Marshall

The bottom line – death is the doorway for the Jesus follower into the presence of Jesus. When we go through the door of death, we have no reason to fear because “perfect love” awaits us. As we pass through the doorway of death, our next moment of awareness we are in the presence of Jesus.

More on what happens to us when we die

New creation can’t simply be more of the same (subject to decay and the never-ending increase in entropy). But it also doesn’t seem likely that it is simply beautiful scenery, peace, and singing alleluia in timeless eternity. In the new creation we continue to live, learn, and experience. The new creation will be wholly sacramental, suffused with the presence of the life of God. Paul talks about resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:20-28
concluding that the unfolding of events is “so that God may be all in all.” Revelation 21 provides the same kind of image for the new heaven and new earth. Inconceivable. Eternity and eternal life present something of a conundrum. The laws of nature in the new heavens and new earth will not be exactly the same, making it hard to imagine. Yet it seems a coherent hope to believe that the laws of its nature will be perfectly adapted to the everlasting life of that world where ‘Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more for the first things have passed away’ (Revelation 21:4), just as the laws of nature of this world are perfectly adapted to the character of its freely evolving process, through which the old creation has made itself. ‘There will be discontinuity within continuity. There is continuity as the new creation is a “redeemed transform of the former’ and discontinuity in the nature of the matter and laws adapted to the eternal imperishable. Paul tells is that ‘flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.’ (1 Corinthians 15:50) This is a mystery, but it must be. Temporal. Time seems an intrinsic part of being. The new creation will not be a timeless world of eternity. It will contain music – defined by the temporal progression of sound – and is better described by analogy to glorious music than to a beautiful, but static, sculpture. The new creation will continue to be a dynamic reality with an ongoing unfolding fulfillment of God’s plans on a different plane. We will continue to grow, learn, explore, and experience in the new heavens and the new earth in the presence of God. There is no static final picture presented in the New Testament, and certainly not in Revelation.

In Christian hope we don’t go to heaven when we die, at least that isn’t our ultimate destiny. We enter into a new creation. A bustling city, a glorious concert, an image of serenity.

a) Resurrection life is not static; the living, ongoing God will create a new creation in which the resurrected will grow and develop and learn and ... well... like God, explore deeper and deeper into who God is, who we are, and what love and justice and peace are all about. The Spirit brings communicative freedom, creation, etc., so we are to see in resurrection life an ongoing creative freedom into newness.

b) Resurrection bodies is not what it is all about; body is individuality and resurrection extends individuality into the kingdom of God — unique identities who are recognizable and who communicate and socialize. The body is about “visible expression” and “personal shape”.

c) Resurrection life is cosmic and corporate, and not just individual: it is a kingdom society.

d) Resurrection spirituality, or what Paul calls the “spiritual body” (pneumatikos), is animation and guidance by the Holy Spirit. The “spiritual body” then is transcendent, Christological and eschatological.

e) Resurrection entails contrast with now, entails continuity with now, and entails transformation.

Biblical Scholar and Theologian, NT Wright writes:

“Heaven is important but it’s not our final destination. If you want to say that when someone dies they go to heaven, fine. But that’s only a temporary holding pattern that is life after death. And what I’m much more interested in, or the New Testament is much more interested in, is what I’ve called life after life after death.”

“I’ve often put it like this, if somebody you know has been very ill, you say, ‘Poor old so and so, he’s just a shadow of his former self.’ And the extraordinary truth in the New Testament is that if you are in Christ and dwell by the spirit you are just a shadow of your future self,” Wright said. “There is a real you to which the present you corresponds as a photocopy corresponds to the glorious original. You know, there is a real you, which God is going to make, and it will be more physical — more real, not less.”

“The point of the resurrection...is that the present bodily life is not valueless just because it will die...What you do with your body in the present matters because God has a great future in store for it...what you do in the present—by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself—will last into God’s future. These activities are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly, a little more bearable, until the day when we leave it behind altogether ... They are part of what we may call building for God’s kingdom.”
Basically, Wright believes that when those who are in Christ die, they do not “go to heaven” as most people imagine. According to Wright, those who die in Christ merely “sleep” in perfect peace in the presence of Christ, if you will, awaiting the “Day of the Lord” when the “dead in Christ” will rise, and the kingdom of God will be fully realized.

Heaven is not our ultimate destination. It is a holding-place, until the final resurrection. At the final resurrection God will re-make our physical bodies. When Christ returns there will be a resurrection and transformation of our bodies. When Christ returns there will be a ‘new heaven’ and a ‘new earth’ and we receive ‘new bodies’, ‘we are resurrected, and heaven comes down to earth.’ A seed falls into the ground and dies. When it comes alive its form as a plant or flower or tree is different to the form that it had as a seed. Similar to the metamorphosis of a caterpillar turning into a butterfly. It is the same organism but through transformation it becomes so much more than it could have ever been in its first form.

A correct biblical view does not say Jesus-followers are ultimately destined for heaven. Instead, at the end of time, God will literally re-make our physical bodies and return us to a newly restored earth. Heaven is important but it is not our final destination.

So, what is "heaven?"

Biblically “heaven” is a temporary holding place. That is "life after death." The Bible gives us few clues about this. Paul says, in Philippians 1:21-23: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far." So, immediately after death, we shall be with Christ, in heaven. And that, of course, is good.

While that is important and interesting, what the New Testament is more concerned with is “life after life after death.” Or, the “after-afterlife.” Here we have far more about our ultimate destination upon being physically resurrected. Our final destination should affect our lives in the here and now. Because we believe in God’s kingdom of justice and peace, it gives us focus to work on God’s kingdom coming in the present. In this regard remember that The Lord’s Prayer was never understood to be a purely future hope. This is the “age to come” invading “this present age.” And while the age to come will come in its fullness at the final resurrection of the dead, the in-breaking of the kingdom (heaven coming to earth) has been happening since the earthly life of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus.

So, to sum up:

a) When a Jesus-follower dies they go to heaven, to be with the Lord.
b) Heaven is not our ultimate destination. It is a holding-place, until the final resurrection.
c) At the final resurrection God will re-make our physical bodies.
d) We will live, in a state of everlasting time, in God's newly restored creation. This will be the unifying of heaven and earth. When "the times reach their fulfillment" God will "bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ." (Ephesians 1:10)

The Importance of Heaven and Hell

This is one of, if not the most important question you will ever think about; a question that every sane person must care about. You can deny that heaven and hell are real, but you cannot rationally be indifferent about the matter. Given what is at stake, the only sensible attitude is to care, and to care deeply.

Say it as you will, heaven remains fascinating:

But I want to emphasize that there is far more involved here than mere fascination. Indeed, fascination can be nothing more than curiosity at the unusual or the entertaining, the mysterious, and even the bizarre. Certainly, much that is written about heaven and hell is sensational and appeals to these tendencies. Moreover, popular writing about the afterlife is often sentimental, simplistic, and emotionally manipulative. The Christian doctrines of the afterlife involve a set of profoundly substantive truth claims with explosive implications.
I believe that a belief in heaven and hell strike at the heart of Christian orthodoxy.

Indeed, I think it is especially incumbent on all who profess orthodox Christianity to remain true to these remarkable doctrines and their far-reaching implications. I find it ironic that contemporary theologians sometimes wax eloquent about the radical nature of Christian theology or the truth of the Christian narrative but become mute or tentative when the issue of heaven is broached. The Christian story is extraordinary, to be sure, but it is radically incomplete and ultimately unsatisfying without a robust doctrine of the afterlife, and one simply cannot seriously affirm Trinity, incarnation, atonement, and resurrection without going on to heartily affirm “the life everlasting.”

Which issues matter then?

In particular, I believe these doctrines are most pertinent to such perennial issues as the problem of evil, the nature of personal identity, the foundations of morality, and, ultimately, the very meaning of life.

**Heaven?**

1. Is the ultimate triumph of God’s love: the human story comes to a comic end.
2. Is the answer to our deepest longings.
4. Is the death of death.
5. Is a reunion of truth, beauty, and goodness.
6. Is a celebration of the best of human culture.
7. Is being at home with God.

These seven big ideas about heaven are biblically solid, non-speculative, and inherent to what the Bible says about heaven.

Happiness - Humans seek to be happy, and any superficial sense of happiness is a reflection of a deep-seated “vision” of happiness. We have a built-in hard drive to desire happiness, but what if that hard drive is a guarantee of frustration, a mechanism that ironically assures our unhappiness because it can never be fully realized? Are we, through no fault of our own, born with an “addiction” for happiness in a universe where it can never be satisfied? Hence – HEAVEN.

Love – Let me point out that there is a deep connection between our yearning for love and our desire for happiness. Only if we love and are loved can we be truly and deeply happy. For many people, the essential key to happiness is to find their soul mate, the perfect relationship that they believe will fulfill them and at last provide the happiness they crave. If we love God most of all, we are thereby inspired to love other things more deeply and truly than we would if we loved them more than we love God. To see God’s face in heaven will not mean that our interest in other people and other created things will diminish or even that we will love them less. Rather, it means we will see God clearly in all his good gifts, and we will love and enjoy them even more as a result. The Trinity is the Alpha and the Omega, and because of that, heaven makes perfect sense. If the Trinity is bedrock reality, then love is the very heart of the meaning of life. And when perfect love achieves its ends, we may hope to find the perfect happiness we crave, the perfect comic end of the cosmic drama.

In the end, Walls thinks of God in a way that means God is the dance itself - C. S. Lewis “that in Christianity, God is not a static thing—not even a person—but a dynamic, pulsating activity, a life, almost a drama. Almost, if you will not think me irreverent, a kind of dance.”

**What is the foundation?**

Because of love, therefore the possibility of hell. If God is good and if God wants all to be saved, then all will be saved — or God is not good. (A common way of framing the problem for belief in hell.) The common response is free will: if all are saved, then there is no free will. Therefore, unless God compels all, and there is no free will, then hell must be a possibility. If freedom can account for evil in this world, the same freedom may explain why hell exists in the next. CS Lewis also famously noted that hell is locked from the inside — by the
choice of those there. Love is demand; love is a choice; love emerges from freedom. The establishment of freedom therefore establishes free choice about love. If God is love, God is freedom; if God is freedom, free choice is part of the world God has made. That is, some may choose not to love God, not to love Jesus, not to be with God forever.

**A Big One about the Afterlife**

Will we recognize our loved ones? Will they recognize us? Will we know one another?

There are some who have what is often called a “Theo-centric” theory of heaven/the afterlife and they tend to focus on our union with God and our worship of God and God as the Be-All of heaven. There are others who have a “socio-centric” theory of heaven/the afterlife and they tend to focus on both a union with God as well as knowledge of one another. And there are some who say, “We can’t know, it’s all speculation, and let’s focus on the present.

This posture will not fit the biblical evidence that focuses on a future kingdom of God. Radical agnosticism about heaven or the future kingdom fails to have the confidence and courage of the biblical authors and tends to diminish the significance of the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

I contend that we will not only know one another but we will know one another even better than we do now. At the end of the gospel of Luke, the Road to Emmaus scene with Jesus, we see both bodily continuity and discontinuity, and part of that continuity is resumption of relationships (Luke 24). If Jesus’ raised body is paradigmatic then personal identity is also resumed fully. Of course, this raises a huge question: How do people maintain identity in continuity between their death and resurrection? How much of us survives? What survives?

Here we enter a big one: Soul or Body? Dualism or monism (physicalism, materialism)? I still favor the dualist option because of passages like 2 Corinthians 5:1-10 and “Today you will be with me in paradise.”) Is death separation of soul and body (dualism)? Physicalists see a more radical form of death — and probably, too, not consciously alive in God’s presence until the resurrection. Do souls recognize one another before resurrection? For the physicalist, do we get a special post-death pre-resurrection temporary body? Do have a “gap” in our existence? And identity is very tricky, too. Our identity is a storied, morally-decided reality and it is also a loving and being loved, relational reality. How much discontinuity can we handle and maintain identity? Walls, no surprise here, thinks purgatory maintains greater continuity.

**What if you DON’T believe in Heaven: What’s that like?**

The tendency today among Christians is not so much to deny heaven as a genuine hope and reality but to minimize it as a factor in the faith or, what is worse, to diminish it by saying we ought to focus on the present life (because, after all, heaven is just speculation).

So today I want to look what happens when we don’t believe in heaven. What’s it really like?

Bertrand Russell - Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labor of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man’s achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul’s habitation henceforth be safely built. Mindless, undetermined origins lead to termination, not a destination. We must accept this cold reality and continue, Russell thinks, to pursue our noblest ideals. Yet, later in life all he could muster was “Outside human desires, there is no moral standard.”
Richard Taylor – He takes the famous myth of Sisyphus as his starting point. Sisyphus, recall, was the mythical character condemned by the gods to push a large stone up a hill, which then rolled back down to the bottom, only to be pushed up again, and again, forever. The main difference between us and Sisyphus is that whereas he continues to push the stone up the hill forever, we pass the task on to our children. They then pick up where we left off and continue in our steps. Civilizations are built and destroyed, but new ones are built on the rubble of earlier ones. We just keep picking up the stones and building afresh, and the beat goes on. We are all Sisyphus, and we are all rolling stones. All we have in our veins is a will to live, and the drive for meaning is vain. Meaning is the satisfaction we find in our life, that’s it. Walls takes him on by contending that visions like Revelation bring far more meaning and hope than his naked reality of meaningless satisfaction brings.

Thomas Nagel – He exhorts us to embrace the irony of our life. ‘Reference to our small size and short life span and to the fact that all of mankind will eventually vanish without a trace are metaphors for the backward step which permits us to regard ourselves from without and to find the particular form of our lives curious and slightly surprising.’ In short, then, one of the inevitable “side effects” of intellectual and emotional sophistication is a sense of the absurdity of our lives. But since our intellectual and emotional sophistication is the very thing that makes us human and gives our lives richness and depth, we should not be unduly bothered by the sense of absurdity that comes with it. Rather, we should embrace the irony and live with it.

Keith Parsons – He offers one of the oldest of all despairs of life: Why not draw the reverse conclusion and say that, since we know life is fleeting, we should strive to experience all the meaning we can in that short compass? The message we should draw from our mortality is this: You have a limited number of days, hours, and minutes. Therefore, you should strive to fill each of those days, hours, and minutes with meaning. You should strive to fill them with learning and gaining wisdom—with compassion for the less fortunate, with love for friends and family, with doing a job well, with fighting against evil and obscurantism, and yes, with enjoying sex, TV, pizza, and ballgames.

Carl Sagan – Carl Sagan did not believe in the afterlife or heaven, said this as he approached death “I would love to believe that when I die, I will live again, that some thinking, feeling, remembering part of me will continue.” A page later, Sagan went on to add, “If there were life after death, I might, no matter when I die, satisfy most of these deep curiosities and longings. But if death is nothing more than an endless sleep, this is a forlorn hope.”

**Heaven in an Instant or Not?**

Protestants argue that humans are instantaneously transformed at death/at the judgment into a condition — let’s call it holiness and love — that is fit for dwelling with God in God’s perfect kingdom. It is unclear for most Protestants how this happens, but it does happen. Put differently, Protestants react against any notion that there is a period during which this transformation occurs. Catholics, on the other hand, believe in purgatory and see it as the time during which God purges the human from his or her sins and beliefs and idols, etc.

The issue here then is the jump from our sinful condition to a perfect condition. How does that happen? Do all experience the same perfect condition? How does “Robin” get from a sinful state to a radically changed holy/love state as a sudden act and still sustain identity?

The issue comes down to this: moral transformation, the kind required for a person to become fit for God’s presence, requires these elements:

a) Character development, which takes time and involves a process. [Hence, purgatory.]

b) Free will, or cooperation, so that the person’s transformation is genuinely engaged. [Hence, time and purgatory.]

c) Instantaneous, colossal transformation — think of the deathbed convert — would create a person and identity so at odds with a person’s previous identity and character that the person would not recognize herself/himself. [So, purgatory is needed in order to maintain one’s personal identity and character transformation.]

**Is Heaven Vital for Morality or Not?**
You may well recall the famous scene in Les Misérables in which Jean Valjean comes clean in public to take the place of another who was in fact on trial instead of himself (Valjean). The scene poses the moral theory called **ALTRUISM**, that is, that one does what is good for others in a disinterested manner. It might be said that altruism is considered by many to be the highest form of moral action; heroic, in fact, when one poses that giving one's life for others is the ultimate act when especially not connected to hope for reward after death. (Some think this kind of altruism is hardwired into us biologically — even if the hardwiring is a fiction that benefits human survival.) Others today contend no one does anything solely for the sake of others but instead all moral action springs from **SELF-INTEREST** and may then be seen as selfishness. Thus, the debate is between altruism and egoism, between morality and self-interest, between other-ness and selfishness.

One scholar I admire contends that the doctrines of heaven and hell are vital to an account of ultimate reality and that this makes best sense of moral obligation and what he calls “deeply persuasive moral motivation.” When faced with a moral action, ought we to choose what benefits ourselves or what benefits others (family, friends, community, nation)? But one wonders then if there is a God, choosing what benefits others also always benefits the individual. Moral duty may seem morally intuitive, but will it be rewarded? Or does it fall flat into a social contribution by death? American culture is described in such a way that one can genuinely wonder if self-interest is not the ruling ground of action instead of morality or altruism. I do not think we need to sever altruism from self-interest. I do believe, though, the naturalistic basis for altruism is lacking. There is a “heaven and hell” basis for ethical behavior. I believe that Biblical view solves the dilemma of egoism vs. altruism.

Christian ethics are based in the Trinity and that we are made in God's image and thus fit for relations with God in God's way of relating. Doing good for the sake of others acts the way the Trinity acts: thus, altruism is Trinity-like. Sacrifice is how the Trinity acts in a fallen world. Thus, it is a foretaste of heaven; to act in egoism is foretaste, then, of hell. So, a belief in heaven, in effect, dissolves the dilemma between egoism and altruism. Acting for others is what makes a person most happy. This is not self-ishness but self-interest. Altruism with no hope of reward is not a heaven-based form of altruism. Resurrection is the ground of Christian action. Ultimate motivation comes from being loved by the ultimate lover and returning that love.

**Without Holiness**

“Without holiness,” the author of Hebrews says, “no one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14). Let’s not get too distracted by who gets there and who does not get there, but instead we can focus on what the author says here: it requires holiness.

What do you think? How do we become holy? How much holiness is required to see the Lord? When do we become holy? Do you think there could be a purgatory?

There are (at least) four options:

1. Some will enter into heaven with “their sins, imperfections, and the like intact, so heaven is not in fact essentially sinless.”
2. Some will be lost and never make it to heaven “if they die without actually becoming completely holy.”
3. At the moment of death — just before, just after — God makes people holy by an instantaneous unilateral act, however imperfect, sinful, and immature in character they may be.” [This means all Christians -- in the sense of every Christian -- regardless of obedience, character, etc. -- is instantaneously fit for God's presence. Some would say there is a difference in rewards, but this fiddles with the meaning of holiness. If you are holy, you are holy -- not partly holy.]
4. Some say, the sanctification process continues after death with our willing cooperation until the process is complete, and we are actually made holy through and through.
Tears in Heaven?

Remember the famous Eric Clapton song, “Tears in Heaven?” Will there be tears in heaven, or at the last judgment? Will tears be the result of realizing how sinful we were or comprehending what we didn’t do and could have done?

Here’s my question: Are tears at the last judgment, or even in heaven, a form of Purgatory? Which of course requires that we define Purgatory, which leads me to Three Models of Purgatory (as outlines by a recent book by Jerry Walls). Are any of these models of Purgatory compatible with Protestant faith? Would you call the instantaneous sanctification of the believer at death/judgment a kind of purgatory?

The spectrum has two poles: The Satisfaction Model, which focuses on Purgatory as punishment and expiation of sins, The Sanctification Model, which focuses on the need for the Christian to become fully holy and fit for the presence of God, and a combination of both in the Satisfaction/Sanctification Model. The big issue is often penance. Penance is seen in some streams of Catholic thought to be satisfaction, and without penance there is still a need for (postmortem) satisfaction.

The Satisfaction Model: Purgatory purges but the sinner must render satisfaction to achieve justice. This time expiates the debt for sins committed after baptism. In much Catholic thought the Church can help a person in Purgatory through suffrages, Mass, indulgences, prayer, etc. The pain of Purgatory is delay of the beatific vision.

The Satisfaction/Sanctification Model: The punishments or pain of Purgatory are designed by God to reform the will so that it conforms to the will of God. Dante’s views are more oriented toward sanctification without eliminating punishment. But his emphasis is spiritual transformation.

The Sanctification Model: Purgatory is about gaining a holy character and a focus on enlightenment of our past that grasps in truth our sin and our character in order fully to comprehend the goodness and purity of God.

A Fourth view argues that God’s heaven permits all believers in as they were at death, but the omniscient God creates space for those persons to be transformed or to be in heaven without temptation. Perhaps Purgatory is the ante-chamber to Heaven.

Wipe away every tear?

Let’s face it, the Christian notion that heaven will wipe away all tears is a staggering thought. If heaven is real, no doubt there are many rapists, murderers, and terrorists who will be there along with their victims. Is this idealistic nonsense? Is it a moral absurdity? Or is it a profoundly moral hope?

The apostle Paul earned the right to speak about suffering and eschatological hope for justice (just read 2 Corinthians 11:24-27). The supreme good of life is to know God and to see God’s face. If that is the supreme good that brings life meaning and joy, then knowing God is the supreme end of life. Such a theory of the supreme good can counter unspeakable evil. If a face-to-face vision of God is an incommensurate good for human beings, that will surely guarantee, for any cooperative person who has it, that the balance of goods over evils will be overwhelmingly favorable. Indeed, strictly speaking, there will be no balance to be struck. And no one who received such benefits would have any claim against God’s justice or complaint against his love. God will have bestowed on those who see him “up close” as great a good as such a finite container can take. God can remake, reshape, and reconfigure out lives — maintaining personal identity — in such a way that joy will overcome unspeakable evil.

But is forgiveness of perpetrators morally good or is it irrational and complicit in injustice? Forgiveness, grace, unconditionality — each combined with repentance, reconciliation, and transformation are the building blocks needed to construct a Christian view of heaven as a place where all will be made right.
What about tears over those who do not embrace God, for those who are in hell? CS Lewis: Shall the misery of the loveless blackmail the joy of the beloved? It is the difference between believing that even the best things of life are destined to come to a tragic end and believing that even the worst things can come to a comic end.

*For your curiosity - The Birth of Purgatory*

Let us assume that to enjoy the presence of God one must enjoy who God is and what God is like and what conditions obtain in the presence of God. Let us agree that at least one of the features of that kind of existence is holiness, utter purity and devotion to God.

Which raises an age-old question: Do people immediately become holy at death or do they endure a process of postmortem holy-making (sanctification, purgation)? In the history of the church both the Orthodox and (especially) the Catholics think there will be for most people a period of purgation, and where this happens is often called Purgatory. The issue here for Protestants is that Purgatory is not in the New Testament and what’s not in the Bible is not to be believed as dogma. The issue for theologians is that plenty of theologians and Christians are not Protestants, and that means that scads and scads of Christians believe in Purgatory.

Which leads to this question: When did belief in the Purgatory begin? If you want the short answer, before we sketch it out, here it is: there are traces of purgation in the Greco-Roman world, in the Bible, but it really got its birth in the legal satisfaction, quantification era of the 12th Century and then was codified in the 13th Century and flourished into the 19th Century.


There are traces and hints and evocations of purgatory in *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, in Cyprian of Carthage (after life prison where purgation occurs; big for Pope Benedict XVI), Augustine (purgation, prayers for dead, four classes of persons), Gregory the Great, Venerable Bede.

The birth of purgatory as a formal doctrine comes from the 12th Century. Saint Patrick’s Purgatory, Peter Comestor, Gratian … all shaped in a context where moral accounting became quantified, where satisfaction theories were at work in justice systems, auricular confession systems, and the value of pain for moral development. Thus, by the 13th Century it’s official: Albertus Magnus is at the core. Pope Innocent IV, in 1254, defined purgatory; Second Council of Lyons in 1274 got its institutional stamp of approval; Pope Boniface in 1300 and the famous jubilee offer of plenary indulgence, and Dante’s immortal Divine Comedy, which graphically framed purgatory.

Protestants, most famously Luther, with an eye on Tetzel, despised the theory of purgatory at work (though Luther’s focus was abuses).

*Views of Hell*

There have been historically THREE views of hell throughout Christendom:

1. **Christian Universalist** (who supports the view that one day God will reconcile all people to himself through Christ). The view that God is working to bring about ultimate reconciliation with those who are lost, even after death, through revealing the true light of Jesus and healing the ‘wounded will’, thus opening the possibility that some could choose God after death. In this view, fire is representative of the purification that scriptures teach that all believers will have to go through. (1 Corinthians 3:12-15). This view cites passages that appear to teach that all people will be saved. This view believes that God’s final judgment will have a remedial and refining purpose. In this view of hell, God is not seen as demanding retributive justice but seeking the restorative judgment. A preterist view of scripture is often utilized. This is to say that the majority of the apocalyptic literature is pointing to the destruction(s) of Jerusalem. There is diversity of differing views in Universalism... from the 'hopeful universalist' to the 'dogmatic universalist’. A critique of dogmatic universalism is that does not take seriously enough (a) the possibility of humans freely resisting God forever, and (b) the fact that the Hell texts do not unambiguously allow for the salvation of all from Hell.

Here’s an interview with a Universalist - http://rachelheldevans.com/blog/ask-a-universalist-response

2. **Traditionalist/exclusivist (“Eternal Torment”)** - the view that only Christians are saved and the lost suffer in an eternal hell and are exclusively kept from eternal life with God and Community. The view that all those who reject God will be tormented for all eternity. This view emphasizes that sin must be punished through agonizing torment. This view appears to contradict God’s OT standard of justice (eye for eye, tooth for tooth). Eternal Torment argues that the magnitude of a crime is not determined by the duration of a crime, so eternal punishment is not unthinkable for a finite life of sin. Eternal Torment relies heavily on a specific surface interpretation of apocalyptic literature i.e. Revelation, Daniel, the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha. Bible passages - Is.66:24, Dan. 12:2, Matt. 5:22, 29-30, 7:13, 10:28, 13:49-50, 25:31-46, Mk. 9:43-45, Lk 12:5, 16:19-26

Here’s an interview with a “Traditionalist” - http://rachelheldevans.com/blog/hell-series-ask-a-traditionalist-1-response-walls

3. **Annihilationalist/Conditionalist** (the view that immortality is conditional upon belief in Jesus Christ, so the unsaved will ultimately be destroyed and cease to exist rather than suffer eternally in hell – the view that there is NOT an eternal torment but that those “damned” with be denied eternal existence). The view that all those who reject God will be consumed by fire and cease to exist. This view claims that innate human immortality is not a biblical idea but borrowed from Greek philosophy. This view asserts that the consequence for sin would be death. Unending life was only attained by eating from the tree of life. Satan originates the idea of immortality after becoming a sinner, telling Eve she will not die. God then bars Adam and Eve from eating from the Tree of Life again, lest they live. The final fate of the wicked is regularly pictured as destruction. (i.e. Revelation 20:15) In this view, fire symbolizes complete destruction. This view allows for punitive justice to be finished and completed. (an eye for an eye). Bible passages - Genesis 2:16-17; 3:4, 22; Matthew 7:13-14; 10:28; 16:25-26; John 3:16; Romans 6:23; 1 Corinthians 3:17; Galatians 6:8; Philippians 1:28; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; 1 Timothy 6:16; 2 Peter 2:1; 3:7-12; 1 John 5:12, Matthew 19:29-30, 25:36, John, 3:36, 4:14, 5:24, 6:40, 47, 54, 68, 10:28, Romans 5:21.

Here’s an interview with an Annihilationalist http://rachelheldevans.com/blog/ask-a-conditionalist-response

There is a great video that I share with my students entitled, Hell Bound. It outlines some of the key issues above and states some helpful insights:

a. Your view of Hell is reflective of your view of God. Does God really need to eternally punish someone for a life of temporal sin? What does it say about God’s character if we say that God loves you but will punish you eternally torture/destroy you if you do not accept God’s love? Is God retributive? How does God judge those who have never heard the Gospel? Are babies predestined to hell? All these above questions are going to have differing answers depending on your view of God. If your view of God is restorative you might read into scripture at a different angle than a person who believes God is ultimately punitive.

b. Is free-will really free? Some people argue that God ultimately predestines both the ‘saved’ and the ‘unsaved’, other views rely heavily on a C.S. Lewis perspective of hell being the greatest monument to free-will.

c. Universalism is a viable theological option for believers (even if you disagree with it). The movie brings up several of the Patristics who subscribed to the Universalist position, most notably Gregory of Nysan who is one of the significant contributors of the Nicene Creed and the formation of the canon. This is to say that many of the people who contributed to our concepts of ‘what is orthodoxy?’ are themselves Universalist. The early church really did not see the doctrine of hell as a contentious issue. The influence of Justin Martyr is key...he taught that personal salvation is not dependent on doctrine, but on the saving work of Jesus alone.

d. Your view of hell does not put you out of the fold of Christianity. Peter Kreeft comments to this end, that ‘praying for God to redeem all souls is a long held Catholic tradition’. We are all trying our best to interpret
scripture in light of the information we have. We should seek humbly to model disagreement in an effort to maintain unity. “There is room for all at the table of discussion.”