

WHAT'S  
THE TRUTH  
ABOUT  
HEAVEN  
AND  
HELL?

DOUGLAS A. JACOBY



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## Part 1

# Think Again

If we are serious about examining what the Scriptures really say about the afterlife, we must be willing to approach the subject with an open mind. This is easier said than done. First of all, everyone interprets, whether he or she is conscious of this or not. Second, we cannot help but bring preconceptions to the discussion of the afterlife. Last, not all Scripture is intended to be read literally. Knowing the difference is key to making sense of the passages touching on the afterlife.





## A Fresh Look

### *Opening Minds*

*The unexamined faith is hardly worth believing.*

#### **Bullet, Darkness, Light**

I was 18, and I was a young Christian. Like many new believers, I was burning to share my faith with everything that moved. That included the blonde from New York, who like me was a freshman at Duke University.

I had no idea she had a gun. One evening we were discussing Christianity. In mid-conversation, and without the slightest warning, she pulled it out of her handbag and shot me. Before everything went dark, I felt the bullet tearing into my chest. I clearly recall the surprisingly intense heat of this minuscule chunk of metal.

I was fading...blackness...then utter calm. I asked out loud, "Am I in heaven?" As my eyes focused, I saw a light, and then a series of numbers—3-5-0. What was happening? And why did I expect to be in heaven? As I came to and to my great disappointment realized I was still alive, the luminous alarm clock informed me it would soon be four a.m. It was all a dream. My question, "Am I in heaven?" was decisively answered by my roommate, Joe. "Go back to sleep, Doug."

What a dream. Would it perhaps be like this one day? What is on the other side?

I didn't have many answers—I'd become a Christian only weeks earlier. So why did my dream take the shape it did? My assumptions about the afterlife had almost certainly come from my religious surroundings. But were they correct? In John 3:13, just three verses before the most famous Scripture in the Bible, Jesus told us, "No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man." What about you—what do you believe about heaven and hell? And if you're a believer in Christ, if a coworker asks you at lunch what you think about the topic, what scriptural basis would you have for your response?

### **Everyone's Interested**

It is indisputable that every culture has believed in life after death. Whenever I read the holy writings of the world's religions, attend a funeral, see a sarcophagus or mummy, or walk through a graveyard, this truth is impressed on me. For millennia humans have speculated about judgment, the afterlife, and how to tip the balance in one's favor lest the final outcome prove negative. Even in countries where religion is discouraged or banned, this orientation toward the future cannot be squelched, and powerful underground movements keep faith alive. Of course the fact that faith is strong is no proof that it is right, but it does—and should—make the nonbeliever stop and think.

In my work I travel a lot, usually explaining the Christian faith and teaching the Bible. Last week I sat next to a fascinating woman on a flight from Mozambique to South Africa. She was well educated, fluent in many languages, and she was an atheist. We had much in common, including two countries (Sweden and Malaysia), and soon she was sharing with me her life philosophy. In short, she reasoned, "There's no need for anyone to live past age sixty."

"Should they be euthanized?" I asked innocently.

"Of course not. But we need to consider the next generation and not be selfish," she explained.

I should probably tell you that this dear woman looked to me to be in her late fifties. Time was short, according to her philosophy. I sensed an opening. "What's your take on what happens after we die?"

“We decompose and become part of future generations of life.”

“Okay, so we become part of the next generation literally. But if the scientists are right, in a few billion years our world will be burnt up by the sun. If nothing’s going to last, then what’s the purpose of it all?” (She had no answer, although she insisted some things in her life were deeply meaningful.) “Then it’s like existentialism? Life is ultimately absurd, so we create our own meaning?” She didn’t know what to say, and not because she didn’t understand the question.

We had a great talk. I was able to identify several things in her life (things she had opened up to me about) that point to something beyond, to purpose and meaning. “You have to admit, the evidence suggests transcendence—something beyond this life.”

“And you believe in God?”

“I do,” I responded. “This world makes a lot more sense if there is a God. I’m a Christian writer, and one of my books is actually on this subject—why belief in God makes more sense than the alternative. I have only one copy left, but it’s yours if you think you’ll read it. When we land in Johannesburg, I’ll be happy to give it to you.”

“Yes, I’d like that.” When we landed, she eagerly introduced me to her work associate, who was on the same flight, and I handed over the book. Was a seed planted? Yes—but long before we met. The Lord had been preparing this soon-to-be 60-year-old for this encounter. We exchanged contact information, and I’m waiting for her response.

What would you have said to her? How would you share your faith in a similar situation? Don’t ever write off atheists as uninterested in the afterlife. In fact, many persons who wouldn’t be caught dead in a church (well, perhaps unless you count funerals) are taken with the paranormal. I find a great response among young and old when I teach about angels and demons, ghosts, and a number of other supernatural topics.

This is a great way to start a conversation with an unbeliever, by the way. Ask what he or she thinks about popular themes (vampires, for example) and then steer the conversation in a spiritual direction. Or ask directly, “What do you think happens on the other side?” You’d be amazed how many people, regardless of whether they have faith, have been waiting for someone to bring this up.

The afterlife is a subject that interests everyone, because it is about

the one thing that happens to us all. Ultimately, nothing could be more relevant. There's a pressing reason many long for this discussion: God has set eternity in their hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11). We are spiritual creatures.

Everyone's interested, but nearly everyone is confused. What's on the other side? Do we go to heaven the second we die? What about near-death experiences? Are we reincarnated? Is hell forever? How literally should we read the book of Revelation? Are there ghosts? What if you aren't a Christian—are there other valid paths? These and many other questions are being asked—and will be addressed in this volume.

This is a crucial conversation. If anything is on the other side of the grave, then heaven and hell aren't just small talk. We need answers, and so do your friends, family, and neighbors. Care enough about others to have this conversation!

## Questions, Questions

Is heaven on earth? Is there a waiting place before judgment day? Do those who haven't heard the gospel get a second chance? Let's see what the Bible says and make an honest effort to sort out the confusion. This means wading into some of the controversies and seeing that sometimes sincere students of Scripture land in different places. And in the process, we may receive some much-needed personal assurance about life after death.

This book may take you into new territory. Even if you're a veteran Bible reader, it is intended to prod you, to push you to think. Though the book touches on matters of eternal significance, there is latitude for flexibility of thought, for acceptance of differing views.

The Bible will be the authoritative text for our discussion in this book.<sup>1</sup> Do you think you know the Bible—that you've already heard all there is to know about heaven and hell? Think again. Bible scholars and teachers worldwide are taking a new look at both heaven and hell. We should too. In researching this volume, I have tried to analyze the most influential as well as the most recent works on heaven and hell. The conversation isn't over your head or inaccessibly erudite. You can listen in.

We all wear colored lenses; no one is (fully) objective. This means we need to keep our minds open and our hearts humble. For that

reason, the three chapters that follow—one on eternity, the other two on interpretation—are probably the most important chapters in the book. You may think, “I only want to know where the author comes out on those who haven’t heard the gospel”—or the second death, or... (fill in the blank). But should you really care what *my* position is? Isn’t it far more crucial to learn how the Lord wants us to read his word? So please don’t skip ahead if you want to be able to weigh the various views on the afterlife.

It’s just possible, once we dig into the Scriptures, that we may change our minds on something important. Let’s not be numbered among the timid souls who cannot, or will not, reexamine their faith. It’s time for a fresh look.

### **In Brief**

- Everyone is interested in the afterlife—nonbelievers as well as believers.
- Even if we have read God’s word, our notions about the afterlife may require refining or even replacing.
- We all have presuppositions regarding heaven and hell. Our knowledge was not attained in a vacuum. Becoming aware of these presuppositions is the best starting place for our inquiry.