

HEAVEN AND HELL



What Do They
Mean?

What Are They
Like?

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By: ***Hushidar Hugh Motlagh***

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What Do They Mean? What Are They Like?

Heaven or hell is our everlasting home. Should we not know our home in advance? Should we not know where we would like to spend eternity? Should we not be able to choose our permanent place of residence?

The afterlife is the very foundation of the spiritual design of creation. Can human life make any sense or serve any purpose without the continuation of that life, and have a purpose that outlasts that physical life?

Our earthly life is considered the season of planting; our spiritual life the season of harvesting. What is that harvest? It is the joy of being near our Creator—the One we have known and loved in this life.

Further, if human life ended here, then the pillars of God's justice—reward and punishment—would crumble. Knowing how we will be rewarded or punished in the next life is essential. That is why it is important to understand the meaning of heaven and hell. Let us now explore the meaning of these critical words.

There are many misconceptions about heaven and hell. Failure to understand this critical feature of the spiritual Design of creation will bring the whole of the Design into question. How can we love God without absolute trust in His sense of justice, without knowing that no one can escape the consequences of his deeds? Many people simply abandon their faith due to their failure to gain a true knowledge of this significant feature of the spiritual design of creation.

Our life in the next kingdom is a mystery. Yet there is much we can learn. God in His wisdom allows us to know as much of this mystery as we should know. If we learn too much, our life will

become centered on that life. If we learn too little, we may ignore that life.

There is another reason we need to gain a glimpse of our future life. The absence of true knowledge creates a vacuum that longs to be filled. Who would rush to fill this vacuum? Who but religious leaders who already enjoy the trust of their followers, who already have a receptive audience? These leaders, with their literal minds and simplistic thinking, have done much to undermine the honor of knowing and loving God. For instance, to gain a convert, they often ask a non-believer to say: “I believe in” Then they inform him that he has now been “saved!” Saved from what? From the fire! Is believing so cheap? Is faith a matter of the heart or a matter of the mouth? Who can truly trust or respect a design with such faulty features? One person is sent to hell to burn forever; while another is sent to heaven to enjoy everlasting joy as a reward for simply uttering a few words. No wonder so many people drift away from faith.

Hell and heaven are among the most misunderstood concepts in all religions. This is especially true with the concept of “hell,” which has become virtually synonymous with permanent burning. Such literal thinking has caused many people to reject hell’s very existence, because they know that a loving God would not inflict such a torture on a helpless human being—even on a merciless criminal.

One reason for the prevailing negative attitude toward “hell” is the strong imagery used to describe it, such as “the fire” and “the insatiable worm.” To have a strong impact on people, some religious leaders have embellished these images. This approach has subdued some followers, and alienated others.

Let us now explore the meaning of these two critical concepts. We should note at the outset that “heaven and hell” do not refer to a fixed location, but rather to the *state of the soul* that can even be experienced in this world. We do not need to die to know what hell and heaven are like. We experience them right here on earth just about every day!

The words “heaven and hell” are used in sacred Scriptures to describe the state of our soul in the afterlife as a consequence of our faith and our deeds in this life. Without the continuation of our lives after death, nothing makes sense. If there is a God, how can He allow so much injustice to prevail? It is better to deny God’s very existence than attribute injustice to Him. The afterlife redresses the injustices of this earthly world. Our life on earth is only the first moment in an eternity. Should we judge the divine justice by this first brief moment of an everlasting journey?

Sacred Scriptures abound with symbols and metaphors—with picturesque language. The imagery relating to “hell” describes the **spiritual** state of the soul both in this life and the next. Why then is “hell” described in such fearful terms as “the fire”? The purpose of the imagery is to motivate the spiritually primitive and insensitive, those who can only respond to fear, not love. Only their fear of hell can prevent them from committing deeds unworthy of human beings. Some people become so callous that even the fear of everlasting fire is not strong enough to quench their selfish desires.

If spiritually primitive people did not exist, there would be no need for policemen or prisons. Those with a strong conscience do not need any motivation. They find the joy of kindness its own reward, and a lack of that joy an act of self-punishment.

Let us now explore what heaven and hell represent. God is both the origin and the ultimate goal of all creation. Our purpose in this life and beyond is to draw toward Him by becoming more like Him, by manifesting His splendid Image stamped on our soul. The more we cultivate that Image, the closer we will draw toward Him. We do not have to die to experience hell and heaven. We experience them here on earth, every day of our life. If our thoughts and deeds are in harmony with what God has planned for us, we are in heaven; if in disharmony, we are in hell. This process continues into the next life.

True joy and happiness come to us from advancing in our journey toward the goal and purpose of all creation. Failure to advance and grow in this life—which is the springtime in our everlasting journey—is the very embodiment of hell.

Some people may say, “I am a ‘good’ person. Why do I need God?” It is extremely difficult to convince such skeptics. Unless they actually experience the difference that the knowledge and love of God can make in their lives, they are incapable of knowing, because human beings like what they believe. “Everyone looks clean in his own eyes.” Our ego constantly sends messages such as: “You are right! Continue to believe what you believe! Others are ignorant! If they knew what you know, they would believe as you believe!”

It is our ego that is the source of all human suffering. It is the ego that keeps the leaders of the world—both political and religious—immersed in disagreement, disunity, and even enmity. We see the workings of ego at all levels of society. Imagine the many married couples who cannot come to an agreement concerning the critical issues in their lives.

Those who believe they do not need God to be good, should remember that they did not design themselves. To attain a level of happiness that is far beyond what they have ever experienced, they must remove the speck of their ego from their soul and submit to the plan of the One who designed them.

Compare human beings with plants. To grow and be healthy, plants need the light of the sun. What if they are deprived of the sun? They can still exist, but can they attain their full potential? In like manner, to grow and flourish, we need the light of knowledge to manifest God’s image, which is engraved on our soul. Without an intimate attachment to our Creator, the beautiful butterfly in our soul cannot manifest its beauty. Just like a cocoon, the ego serves as a prison for our soul. Nothing can liberate us from this prison except the joy and the honor of bonding with our Creator. The knowledge and love of God are as essential to our spiritual well-being and survival as sunshine and air are to our physical well-being and survival. There can be no exception to this rule. That is the way God designed us.

A failure to acknowledge this fact is an act of self-punishment with everlasting consequences.

Imagine the freedom our Creator has granted us. Not only can we reject Him, we can even arise to oppose Him. In fact, there are those who promote atheism! Here lies the mystery and beauty of our life: We are allowed to oppose the One who designed us, owns us, and has infinite power over us, without facing any apparent consequences. We are simply allowed to engage in self-punishment.

Only when we step from the earthly realm to the heavenly realm will we truly know what difference the knowledge and love of God has made in the quality and cultivation of our soul. This life does not have the capacity to expose the state and quality of our soul.

This life is the stage of the bud; the next, the stage of the flower. In this world, the true state of our soul remains invisible. In this world, we can gain only a glimpse of the splendid beauty within the soul of those who have fully cultivated their spiritual potential. Only when we break out of the shell of our earthly life can we manifest and witness our hidden image.

Consider two equally attractive boxes. On the surface they look alike—until we open them. In one box we see jewels and gold; in the other junk and garbage. Yes, here in this life our soul is imprisoned within our physical form. Only when it is set free will our true identity be revealed. After the transition, there are those who will manifest a splendor beyond description; others who will have nothing to reveal except shame.

If you have a good heart, if you are kind, honest and charitable, and sincerely grateful to the One who gave you the gift of life, you do not need to fear “hell”—separation from God. What about those who live a “good” life, but choose to reject or ignore God. What should they expect? If we define “heaven” as “nearness to God,” what should a person reasonably expect who chooses to have no connection with God? If our goal in this life is to travel toward a city, what can we expect if we choose a path that takes us to a different destination? How then can a traveler who chooses to travel to the east arrive in the west? How then can anyone who chooses to avoid the sun, enjoy its blessings? To reject or ignore God and still be in heaven—nearness to God—is a sheer

contradiction. As stated earlier, we do not simply “enter” heaven; we carry our “heaven” with us. How can we take with us something that we **do not** have?

Engaging in good deeds is not the sole purpose of our life. It is an evidence of moving toward our destination. God is our goal. Good deeds are the provisions of our journey toward Him.

The next question is this: are those who choose to ignore God equal? Of course not! Deeds—good or evil—stand on their own, independent of faith or lack of it. Justice demands that each individual face the precise consequences of what he has done with what he has been given. This is a perfect definition of justice:

From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

Christ (Luke 12:48 NIV)

Compare the state of those who think that they have no need for God to a rose. To grow, a rose must absorb nutrients from the ground and receive oxygen and light from above. Compare our good deeds to the nutrients in the ground, and our relation to God to oxygen and sunlight. What will happen to a rose deprived of adequate oxygen and sunlight? Perhaps it will survive, but can it manifest all its potential for beauty and fragrance? Can it become the best rose it is capable of becoming? Of course not! However, it will still be a rose. The example of a rose demonstrates the life of a good person who chooses to ignore or reject God.

What about others, those who not only reject God, but also engage in evil deeds? Can they also be called a “rose”? No, their unworthy and deceitful deeds turn them into a hurtful weed, such as poison ivy. Such people live like a weed and die as a weed. What a difference there is between a stunted flower and a poisonous weed! They are incomparable.

God is both just and graceful. Only by His grace does He accept the noble deeds of those who ignore His presence during their earthly life. To gain a glimpse of God’s infinite grace and favor to His intelligent creatures, consider this example. Suppose your loving father comes to visit you, but instead of embracing him, you

say: “Who are you?” He says: “I am your father.” And you say: “I do not care who you are!” And then you walk away! How angry do you think your father will be? This example demonstrates the ingratitude we express toward our Creator when we choose to ignore or deny Him—the One who is closer to us than we are to ourselves! And what does He expect from us? Simply, to respond to His call, to accept His love, and to welcome His presence in our lives. Is that too much to ask?

Let us now explore the meaning of some of the metaphors used in sacred Scriptures to describe the state of our soul in the afterlife. In the next Kingdom, we will not have a physical form. Therefore, “fire” and “worm” cannot hurt us. “Fire” stands for a burning desire in our soul to be near the source of All-Knowledge and All-Joy—God Himself; and “insatiable worm” for our everlasting sense of regret for having failed to advance spiritually while we had a chance—when it was the “springtime” in our destiny. This is the message we will hear from our soul for ages and eons: “The spring has passed away; the everlasting winter has arrived. It is dark and gloomy. How can I live in this hard winter for ages and eons to come? I did so much for my physical comforts. Why did I do so little for my soul—for my spiritual welfare? How I wish to be given another chance! No, that is impossible! That is merely wishful thinking.”

A primitive, deprived soul will live through these thoughts for countless ages and eons. It will never stop wondering and asking, just like an “insatiable worm that never stops eating!”

Let us now study the meaning of hell and heaven in more detail. Many people think that we cannot truly imagine what the next life will be. They are absolutely right. Could we imagine this life while still in the womb? Although we cannot truly imagine the next life, there is much that we can know. We are given many clues concerning our future life and destiny. By far the most significant piece of knowledge we are given is this: For everything we find in this life, we will find something like it in the next life. In other words, the next world is a close image of this world. What does

this mean? It means that there are many similarities between the two kingdoms, between our earthly and heavenly life.

Let us explore some of the similarities. We have a clear sense of identity in this life. We know who we are. We will continue to preserve our identity and our memory of our life in this world. We will experience all the emotions we experienced here. We will be able to associate with others, and will have opportunities to learn, to love and to grow.

However, we will also discover some major differences between the twin Kingdoms. By far the greatest difference is this: here on earth, people at different levels of spiritual maturity and nobility are allowed to live together side by side, sometimes in the same family. In the spiritual Kingdom, ***we will be separated according to the level of perfection or imperfection we have achieved during our earthly life.*** We will discover that the souls around us have achieved similar perfections. If we are selfish and deceptive, we will discover everyone else around us is also selfish and deceptive.

The study of sacred Scriptures shows that in the spiritual Kingdom there are countless grades or levels of perfection and imperfection. After passing from this life, each of us will enter or attain a designated level of spiritual perfection in harmony with what we have achieved on earth.

We do not have detailed information about these levels. There is only one reference in the sacred Scriptures that offers some clues. For instance, we are told that hell—remoteness from God—has “seven gates.” Each “gate” leads to a unique dimension of existence. I have found no other reference concerning the grades or levels in heaven. Perhaps this mystery will become known in the future.

We should recognize that these levels or grades consist of spiritual dimensions. The best way we can know how we will function in such a dimension is to compare it to the world in which we dream. In the dream world the laws of physics do not apply. Time and space do not exist. Yet somehow we experience both of them. How can this be possible?

We should remember that each of those “levels” or “grades” consists of a world or worlds so vast that we cannot imagine them. Each of them may also contain countless sublevels. Those at any given level are quite similar, even more so within each sublevel. Can those living on various levels communicate with each other?

They that are of the same grade and station are fully aware of one another's capacity, character, accomplishments and merits. They that are of a lower grade, however, are incapable of comprehending adequately the station, or of estimating the merits, of those that rank above them. Each shall receive his share from thy Lord. Blessed is the man that hath turned his face towards God, and walked steadfastly in His love, until his soul hath winged its flight unto God, the Sovereign Lord of all, the Most Powerful, the Ever-Forgiving, the All-Merciful.¹

Bahá'u'lláh

Just as we can grow spiritually in this life, so can we grow in the next life. Once again, we do not know the details. Will growth be possible only within a given level? Or can we also grow from one level to another? It is evident that growth from one sublevel to another is possible. What about from level to level, from one world or universe to another? This we do not know.

One of the great mysteries of the afterlife is the state of children. They have not been given a chance to choose their destiny. How will they be treated? We are told that they will have opportunities to grow in the next Kingdom. They will grow under the loving care of spiritual beings.

Contrary to what we tend to think, such as—children are innocent, why are they allowed to die?—they are the most fortunate! Instead of facing the imperfections and struggles of this life, they will have a chance to grow in a most splendid environment. If we could witness their ultimate destiny, we would realize that they are well pleased with what has happened to them, that if they were given a chance, they would choose to grow in that Kingdom of perfection. Only our lack of faith makes us deny God's mercy for the innocent and the weak.

The classification of souls according to what they have achieved, or have made of themselves, here on earth, provides us with much insight into the meaning of **hell** and **heaven**. It gives us an excellent view of what those words really mean.

Can we here on earth gain any clues concerning our future life? Yes, we can. We can be certain of this fact: If we are loving in this world, we will be surrounded by loving people. What if we are selfish, deceptive, and dishonest? The same rule applies. We should expect to be surrounded by the same kind of people. Is this not the essence of justice? "This is what you made of yourself. This is what you deserve! This is how you treated others. This is how you will be treated!" Only God's mercy can override this rule. Is it wise to disregard God's ***justice*** and depend only on His ***mercy***?

God does not need to reward or punish anyone. We will do so by the way we treat others—by our facing the natural consequences of what we make of ourselves and how we treat others.

Let us now look at another similarity between the two Kingdoms. How vast is our universe? It is endless. Without any question, intelligent life, like ours, exists in countless planets throughout the universe. Nothing that pertains to God is finite. To set any limits on God's creation is to set limits on God Himself.

As recorded in the *Times magazine*, “The consensus in the field is that there’s somewhere between a thousand and a million technologically advanced civilizations just in our own galaxy.”³

Verily I say, the creation of God embraceth worlds besides this world, and creatures apart from these creatures.⁴ Bahá'u'lláh

As stated, sacred Scriptures declare that the earth and the heavens are mirror image of each other. The estimated number of stars in the universe is 10^{28} . This is just the number of stars. The number of planets is far greater. If we count at the rate of one per second, it will take us billions of years to count the stars in the known universe. Are there also an infinite number of spiritual worlds?

Once again, we cannot set any limit on God's creation. There must be countless billions of ***spiritual worlds***, each with its own distinctions. In every one of them, there are spiritual beings who, in their earthly life, attained a specific level of perfection or imperfection.

Just as there are universal laws that govern the entire universe, so are there spiritual laws that govern God's spiritual Kingdom. Our knowledge of creation leads us to this conclusion: when we look at the infinite dimensions of creation, we feel we are as nothing. Yet each of us contains the whole spiritual universe within us. How can this be true? Are we not created in God's image? What does this mean? That God endowed our spirit with everything that He had. Could God be more generous than to give Himself to us? That is an evidence of His supreme love for human beings. What more could God give us?

To summarize: The broad principles offered here are quite accurate, but the details are approximations. We will know the details only after we have made our final departure. As stated, heaven and hell have been misunderstood and abused. Their description in sacred Scriptures is mostly symbolic. They symbolize the various levels of perfection or imperfection we attain during our earthly life. Each of us at the moment of death will enter a unique spiritual dimension where we will meet countless human beings who are quite like us. This is how we will "receive" or "reap" what we planted here on earth. Our happiness depends on what we deposit in our spiritual account. At that point—the moment of our departure—we will know how poor or wealthy we are. We will learn that the only thing we own—that truly belongs to us—is our soul. ***We will learn that the times that we truly lived were the moments we devoted to our spiritual life and destiny.***

The Dream World

What do our dreams teach us about the afterlife? While asleep, the relationship between the body and the soul changes. The soul gains

new powers and a greater freedom to explore the unknown. The dream world points to another universe entirely different from the one that we experience through our physical form. In that dimension “time” does not exist. In this universe, an event can exist only if it happened in the past or is occurring in the present. A future experience can have no existence. In that universe, the barriers between what exist and what do not exist disappear. In that universe “time” as we experience it on earth, has no existence. The future becomes one with the past and present. How can we know this? Through dreams of the future. Such dreams are an undeniable evidence of the existence of that universe. Dreams that come true in the future are the most convincing evidence of a spiritual dimension. Let me offer two examples, one about a relative, and the other about a friend.

Some years ago, one of my relatives was told in a dream by a saintly figure—‘Abdu’l-Bahá—that he would die ten years later. He shared his dream with me and many others. When he told me about his dream, some two years before his death, he was in excellent health. We walked together and shared stories. Then came the news of his death at the appointed time—ten years after his dream. He died from a heart attack at night while asleep. His son, who like the father was a doctor, could not revive him.

A dear friend of mine told me that when he was a child, his entire family became sick, except one of his siblings. An epidemic disease was spreading and many were dying. The young mother, who was also sick could not help her children. One night she dreamed of the same saintly person—‘Abdu’l-Bahá—who told her the precise age at which she would die. The entire family finally recovered. Afterwards, whenever people warned this mother to be “careful about her health,” she would simply say: “I know when I will die!” She knew the year, but not the month. She lived a long life, including the last predicted year, and six months more.

Consider thy state when asleep. Verily, I say, this phenomenon is the most mysterious of the signs of God amongst men, were they to ponder it in their hearts. Behold how the thing which thou hast seen in thy dream is, after a considerable lapse of

time, fully realized. Had the world in which thou didst find thyself in thy dream been identical with the world in which thou livest, it would have been necessary for the event occurring in that dream to have transpired in this world at the very moment of its occurrence. Were it so, you yourself would have borne witness unto it. This being not the case, however, it must necessarily follow that the world in which thou livest is different and apart from that which thou hast experienced in thy dream. This latter world hath neither beginning nor end. It would be true if thou wert to contend that this same world is, as decreed by the All-Glorious and Almighty God, within thy proper self and is wrapped up within thee. It would equally be true to maintain that thy spirit, having transcended the limitations of sleep and having stripped itself of all earthly attachment, hath, by the act of God, been made to traverse a realm which lieth hidden in the innermost reality of this world.⁵

Bahá'u'lláh

In His wisdom, God allows some people to catch a glimpse of the afterlife in their dreams. We are told that the very purpose of such dreams is to help us acknowledge the existence of the soul and the life beyond.

Some dreams are figments of our own imagination; others are reflections of reality. These dreams are quite valuable. They offer subtle signs and clues to warn us and help us to make the best possible choices, especially when we face crises and critical decisions.

What can our dreams teach us about the higher and lower stages of spiritual life? I have heard several dreams concerning heaven, but none concerning “hell”—which is synonymous with “remoteness from God.” Near-death visions that point to primitive levels of spiritual life are also extremely rare. Perhaps those spiritual spheres must remain a mystery here on earth. Nevertheless, I am one of the few who have been allowed to see radically different environments—spheres that portray both lower and higher stages of spiritual life. It is unnecessary to go into the details. The most striking feature of the lower stages, as I witnessed in my dreams,

was a lack of beauty in the environment and a lack of joy in the people. Is this not what “hell” is like, here on earth? The most striking feature of the higher stages was a sense of joy and peace in my soul and a state of utter beauty in the environment.

References

1. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 165.
2. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 151-152.
3. *Times*, December 2010, p. 8.
4. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 152.
5. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 151.