

“Joy and Pain”

*Psalm 49:14-15; Matthew 8:10-12;
Revelation 20:11-15 (NRSV)*

Will we choose heaven, in this life and the next?

I really enjoy a good movie, so I recently checked out Toy Story 4. I thoroughly enjoyed it and left with a few theological questions to talk about. The one that stuck with me was the plight of Forky. I will explain.



Little Bonnie must go to pre-school without any of her beloved toys, so she improvises, digging around in the trash for this and that. She emerges with a toy made from a spork, some pipe cleaners, and a broken popsicle stick. She names her new toy “Forky.” But Forky has a deep-seated problem. In his mind, because he came from trash, he is not a toy—only trash and his only home is the trashcan. Forky refuses to consider embracing the joy of being Bonnie’s favorite toy and keeps returning to the trash. Time and again, Woody relentlessly pulls Forky out of the trash, only to have the pitiable spork jump back in. Forky, you see, thinks that the trash is all there really is and he is perfectly happy at the bottom of the basket, never grasping the joy that lies a few feet away.

C. S. Lewis told a similar story about a boy who is perfectly happy playing in the mud of his backyard, never knowing that the glories of the beach are just two blocks away. Lewis wrote a little book about the mud and the beach – earth and heaven – titled, *The Great Divorce*. In the preface Lewis writes:

If we insist on keeping Hell (or even Earth) we shall not see Heaven: if we accept Heaven we shall not be able to retain even the smallest and most intimate souvenirs of Hell . . . But what, you ask, of earth? Earth, I think, will not be found by anyone to be in the end a very distinct place. I think earth, if chosen instead of Heaven, will turn out to have been, all along, only a region in Hell: and earth, if put second to Heaven, to have been from the beginning a part of Heaven itself.¹

The trashcan or Bonnie? Earth or heaven? Hell or heaven? In *The Great Divorce*, Lewis tells the story of a man who visits Gray Town (Hell) and is taken on a bus ride to the world of light (Heaven). On the way, he meets fellow passengers and comes to see that all those in Gray Town choose to be there and choose to stay there. As is sometimes said, the gates of hell are locked from the inside or as Lewis puts it, “The choice of every lost soul can be expressed in the words ‘Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.’”

Hell?

The Great Divorce is an imaginative presentation of Lewis’s theology of heaven and hell. You may have some different thoughts. I have learned that, among Christians, there are widely varying beliefs about these matters. But it is important to remember that this is an intramural argument, i.e., one amongst believers. Tough topics, like this one, call for us to pour a lot of grace out upon one another, recognizing that we will not all agree. We will still be debating this and many topics up until the day we meet Jesus face-to-face, when I surely hope to get some definitive answers to my many questions.

¹ Lewis, C.S. *The Great Divorce* (p. viii-ix). New York, HarperOne.

As you contemplate these things, some background will be helpful.

- Much of what we think we know about hell comes from Dante's *Inferno* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*—works of FICTION. These are enormously imaginative and powerful works that have laid claim to the cultural psyche.
- In the cosmology of most ancient peoples, the gods are “up there,” the living are here on the ground, and the dead are below, under the ground. This was true for the Greeks and the Jews alike. The above passage from Psalm 49 refers to *Sheol*. This was the name given by the Jews to the place of the dead – “down there,” the underworld some might call it. There was no sense of it being a place of punishment, but just the place where the dead are. The Greek name for this place was *Hades*. There are 65 references in the Old Testament to *Sheol* and 10 references in the NT to *Hades*. Again, it is crucial to grasp that these were not places of punishment—shadowy and creepy, yes, but not punishment.
- There are 13 references in the NT to “hell,” which is different than “Hades.” Of these, eleven come from the mouth of Jesus. “Hell” translates the Greek word *Gehanna* and refers to an actual place:
 - “The best-known biblical image for hell derives from a deep, narrow gorge southeast of Jerusalem called *gê ben hinnōm*, “the Valley of Ben Hinnom,” in which idolatrous Israelites offered up child sacrifices to the gods Molech and Baal. King Josiah defiled the valley to make it unacceptable as a holy site (2 Kings 23:10), after which it was used as a garbage dump by the inhabitants of Jerusalem. As a result, the valley became known as the place of destruction by fire in Jewish tradition. The Greek word *gehenna*, ‘hell,’ commonly used in the NT for the place of final punishment, is derived from the Hebrew name for this valley.”²
 - Because Jesus is referring to the ever-burning garbage dump of Jerusalem, Jesus’ warnings are centered on what will happen to his fellow Jews if they do not abandon the course they are on and embrace Jesus’ way and the coming of God’s kingdom. As you know, they did not. Forty years later the Romans burned Jerusalem, piling countless Jewish bodies into the horrors of *Gehanna*.

In the end, we affirm that we have been created to live in loving fellowship with God and one another. The life for which we have been made is a life with God. And it is in God alone that we find true life.

Daily Bible Readings - *More on Sheol, Gehanna, Hades, and Hell*

Monday	Jeremiah 7:30-34	The “valley of the son of Hinnom” would come to be called <i>gehanna</i> , the garbage dump of Jerusalem.
Tuesday	Psalm 16	The psalmist contrasts the temple, the path of light, with Sheol, the abode of the dead.
Wednesday	Acts 2:22-28	In Peter’s sermon, he quotes from Psalm 16 in verses 25-28. Notice that <i>Sheol</i> (a Hebrew name) is changed to <i>Hades</i> (the Greek name for the abode of the dead). Same place; different name.
Thursday	Philippians 2:5-11	In v. 10, “in heaven, on earth, and under the earth” describes the entirety of all that God made.
Friday	John 14:1-7	Jesus goes to prepare a place for his disciples.
Saturday	Revelation 21	The new heavens and new earth

² Ryken, L., Wilhoit, J., Longman, T., Duriez, C., Penney, D., & Reid, D. G. (2000). *Dictionary of biblical imagery* (electronic ed.) (376). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.