

New Image Ministries
Summer Bible Study 2025

“Putting on the Mind of Christ”

LESSON 5 “Heaven” and “Hell

I thought that we could start our lesson again with quotes from the founding father’s and mother’s of our faith.

God wanted to give human beings their fullness right from the beginning, but they were incapable of receiving it because they were still little children.

ST. IRENAEUS (125–203), “AGAINST HERESIES”

It is the whole of nature, extending from the beginning to the end, that constitutes the one image of God Who Is.

ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA (330–395), “ON THE CREATION OF MAN”

As many others have said in different ways, we all seem to suffer from a tragic case of mistaken identity. Life is a matter of becoming fully and consciously who we already are, but it is a self that we largely do not know. It is as though we are all suffering from a giant case of amnesia. When we go to the movies or when we read stories in books, we realize that the protagonists in so many fairy tales are already nobles, royal, daughters and sons of the king, or even the gods. But their identity is hidden from them, and the story line is all about this discovery. They have to grow up to discover their own identity. That discovery is the very purpose of the journey.

It is religion's job to teach us and guide us on this journey to discover our True Self, but it usually makes the mistake of turning this into a worthiness contest of some sort, a private performance, or some kind of religious achievement on our part, through our belonging to the right group, practicing the right rituals, or believing the right things. These are just tugboats to get us away from the shore and out into the right sea. They are the oars to get us working and engaged with the Mystery. Never confuse these instruments with your profound “ability to share in the divine nature” itself (2 Peter 1:4).

It was mostly the fathers of the early church who never compromised on what they called theosis or “divinization,” as we see in the powerful quotes above. There are many more such astounding quotes, but this very memory is also a part of our amnesia. The Gospel was just too good to be true—for a future-oriented, product-oriented, and win-lose worldview.

Such deep knowing about our true selves is probably what John had in mind when he wrote, “It is not because you do not know the truth that I am writing to you, but rather because you know it already!” (1 John 2:21). Otherwise, he would not have had the self-confidence to write about spiritual things with such authority

Mature religion is always trying to get us out of the closing prison-house of the false self. Many have said that spirituality is much more about unlearning than learning, because as we mature and grow up, we also grow up into major illusions, all of which must be undone to free him from prison and take him back to our beginnings in God. “Unless you change and become like a little child, you will not enter the reign of God,” Jesus says (Matthew 18:3). He says this in response to the egotistical and ambitious question of the apostles, who were asking him, “Who is the greatest?”

I have sometimes wondered if we might be surprised and disappointed by what it means that our faith is “built on the faith of the apostles,” as we have so proudly sung and proclaimed. They barely ever got the point and seem as foolish as we are, but God still used them, because, like all of us, they were little children too. We are all and forever beginners in the journey toward God and truth.

“HEAVEN” AND “HELL”

Any discovery or recovery of our divine union, our oneness, has been called “heaven” by most traditions. Its loss has been called “hell.” The tragic result of our amnesia is that we cannot imagine that these terms are first of all referring to present experiences. When we do not know who we are, we push all enlightenment off into a possible future reward-and-punishment system, within which hardly anyone wins. Only the True Self knows that heaven is now and that its loss is hell—now. The false self, our old nature, makes religion into the old “evacuation plan for heaven,”.

Amnesia has dire consequences.

No wonder the Jews say “remember” so much.

A person who has found their True Self has learned how to live in the big picture as a part of deep time and all of history. Finding our true self and living in this oneness is called living in “the realm of God” by Jesus, and it is indeed a major about-face. The only way to do this is that we let go of our own tiny realms, which we normally do not care to do. Life is all about practicing for heaven. We practice by choosing this oneness—ahead of time—and now. Heaven is the state of union both here and later. As now, so will it be then. No one is in heaven unless they want to be, and all are in heaven as soon as they live in union. Everyone is in heaven when they have plenty of room for communion and no need for exclusion. The more room we have to include, the bigger our heaven will be.

Perhaps this is what Jesus means by there being “many rooms in my Father's house” (John 14:2). If you go to heaven alone, wrapped in your private worthiness, it is by definition, not heaven. If your notion of heaven is based on the exclusion of anybody else, then it is by definition, not heaven. The more we exclude, the more hellish and lonely our existence always is. How could anyone enjoy the “perfect happiness” of any heaven if they knew their loved ones were not there or were being tortured for all eternity? It would be impossible. Remember our Christian prayer, “on earth as it is heaven.” As now, so then; as here, so there. We will all get exactly what we want and ask for. You can't beat that.

If we accept a punitive notion of a god who punishes or even eternally tortures those who do not love “him,” then we have an absurd universe where most people on this earth end up being more loving than God! God excludes no one from union but must allow us to exclude ourselves in order for us to maintain our freedom. Our word for that exclusion is hell, and it must be maintained as a logical possibility. There must be the logical possibility of excluding ourselves from union and choosing separation or superiority over community and love. No one is in hell unless they choose a final aloneness and separation. It is all about desire, both allowing and drawing from the deepest level of our desiring.

Why would Jesus' love be so unconditional while he was in this world and suddenly become totally conditional after death? Is it the same Jesus, or does Jesus change his policy after his resurrection? The belief in heaven and hell is meant to maintain freedom on all sides, with God being the freest of all, to forgive and include, to heal and to bless even God's seeming “enemies.” How could Jesus ask us to bless, forgive, and heal our enemies, which he clearly does (Matthew 5:43–48), unless God is doing it first and always? Jesus told us to love our enemies because he saw his Father doing it all the time, and all spirituality is merely the “imitation of God” (Ephesians 5:1).

Our spiritual journey will always begin as an exclusive elitist mindset and ends with an understanding of the “ALL”. Always! Which is truly the understanding of the Last Supper – Communion.

Life moves first toward diversity and then toward union of that very diversity at ever higher levels. It is the old philosophical problem of “the one and the many,” which Christianity should have resolved in its belief in God as Trinity. Up to now, we have been more in love with elitism than with any notion of community or relationship. We liked being the “one” but just did not know how to include the many in that very One. Soon we will explore the truth that God is not a “HE” but a “WE”.

Even Pope John Paul II (1920–2005) said that heaven and hell were primarily eternal states of consciousness more than geographical places of later reward and punishment.

We seem to be our own worst enemies, and we forget or deny things that are just too good to be true. The ego clearly prefers an economy of merit, where we can divide the world into winners and losers, to any understanding of grace, where merit or worthiness loses all meaning. In the first case, at least a few of us “good guys” attain glory. In the second case, all the glory is to God.

To God be the Glory!