

Heaven and Hell: Part Three

Speaker: Tim Mackie

[EMSB theme fades in]

Hey everybody, I'm Tim Mackie, and this is my podcast, "Exploring My Strange Bible." I am a card-carrying Bible history and language nerd who thinks that Jesus of Nazareth is utterly amazing and worth following with everything that you have. On this podcast, I'm putting together the last twenty years' worth of lectures and sermons, where I've been exploring the strange and wonderful story of the Bible and how it invites us into the mission of Jesus and the journey of faith. And I hope this can all be helpful for you, too. I also helped start this thing called BibleProject. We make animated videos and podcasts and classes about all kinds of topics in Bible and theology. You can find all those resources at bibleproject.com. With all that said, let's dive into the episode for this week.

[EMSB theme fades out]

All right, we are continuing in this four-part series on Heaven and hell. It's a lecture series I did a number of years ago. In this third lecture, we're going to be exploring—in light of the definitions of human life and death on pages one through three of the Bible, and in light of the way those concepts develop—how humans can exist in a state of living death, and how the goal of God's rescue mission is to take people out of that living death and transfer them into a mode of eternal life, here in the present.

And so there's two ways to be a human being right now, according to the biblical story: to be among the living dead, or to be among the truly living because of what Jesus did. And so in light of that, we're going to move on to a new part of the story, which is the Old Testament vision of "final justice"—of why God has to bring some kind of culminating act of justice on human evil.

And then second: what is the Old Testament hope about what comes after God's final justice? It's the idea of new creation and resurrection, in particular. And all of this is really necessary to help us go back to the New Testament and to read texts that may be familiar to some of you, but that ultimately—I think—are incomprehensible if you don't understand the Old Testament storyline that helps make sense of what Jesus and the apostles are trying to say.

And so that's what we're covering in this episode: the Old Testament "Day of the Lord," "final justice" kind of stuff, and also the origins of the idea of "eternal life" and "resurrection" in the Old Testament. And that'll set us up for the last lecture, to dive into the teachings of Jesus and the apostles about all of this stuff. So cheers—onward. Let's dive in.

[Musical break (2:57–3:03)]

We've advanced in the storyline here to eternal life and death as being present realities. They're realities that continue on past physical death into the intermediate state. And, you know? You read the most relevant biblical passages about the intermediate state—there they are [Tim gestures to visual]. What I want to do is talk about this transition moment. This is where the majority of biblical passages that talk about the future—that talk about the future hope that we have as followers of Jesus. [Tim gestures to visual] The Bible has a lot to say about this latter half of the drawing right here. And this latter half of the drawing is, well, again, what you could call "life *after* life after death."

So what people in our culture are most interested in is this right here [Tim gestures to visual]—this is what the Bible has the least to say about. What the Bible has the most to say about is this event right here—the return—the resurrection—the final judgment—Jesus's return. [Tim gestures to visual] This is page 5.5 of the handout, here.

In the Hebrew Bible, there is this expectation that there will be a day, or a time, when the creator sets all things right in his world. This is a core, *core* part of Christian hope. And it's not . . . a day—it's often called a day of wrath, the "day of God's wrath"—the "day of God's judgment," which doesn't mean that he's, like, "ticked off," and just wants to, like, trash everybody and everything because he's just, whatever—he's the God who has a chip on his shoulder. No. The Day of the Lord—the Day of God's Judgment—is because he's passionately committed to the life and the flourishing of his creation. He's protecting it. He's giving it a new lease on life, which means that he has to deal with evil

in all its forms—large forms and small forms—and that’s what the Day of the Lord is about.

And so the imagery connected with the Day of Judgment is primarily—well, as we’ll see—it’s negative imagery. And again, if this bothers you—you know, I think for people who were born at the latter end of the twentieth century, like, this actually shouldn’t be that hard for us to get.

So, like, we were all born during the last—[Tim laughs] I don’t want to assume anything here about people’s age in the room—during about . . . the latter half, the latter half—yeesh, okay, [Tim laughs] sorry—I’m sorry. Okay, we were all born in the twentieth century, yes? Is there anybody under eleven here? Okay, sorry—I’m sorry, I’m sorry. My math is bad. [Tim grins] Okay, I’m starting on the wrong foot, right? Okay.

We were all born in the twentieth century, yes? More humans died at the hands of other humans in the twentieth century than *any* century in the history of the human race—you do know this? It was the bloodiest, most murderous century in human history. You and I were born in that century. There’s something deeply wrong with us if we’re not ticked about how things are in the world right now—right? There’s something wrong with God if he is not *ticked* about what we’ve done to his world. Just take the twentieth century [Tim laughs]—you know what I mean? Not the count—not the times before that.

So that’s where this comes from—this is not the perpetual like, you know, OCD, “can’t”—like, you know—“deal with human failure” God. No, this is like—[Tim laughs] you know? You know what I’m saying? Like that’s what we have in our minds. And this is not—this is God dealing with the horrendous, unspeakable human evil that’s just wreaked havoc in our world. And it’s not evil *out there*. It’s the evil that’s inside of every single one of us in different degrees, you know? And that’s what this is about.

So let’s read some of these passages—and they’re very vivid—they’re pretty intense, but that’s the context. So in the Hebrew Bible, this is about the removal of evil and injustice from God’s world. We’ll just sample one passage from Malachi: “Surely it is coming. The day is coming. It will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble. And that day that is coming will set them on fire,” says the Lord Almighty. ‘Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.’”

Beautiful metaphor, right? And it’s like the sunrise that brings heat. So what are the wings of the sunrise? You guys in the habit of watching sunrises? You know, if you got a good—it happens at sunsets too—the purple rays that go [Tim gestures to visual]—this thing here [Tim gestures to visual] so this is the wings—“the wings of the sunrise will bring healing with them,” right?

“And you will go out”—[Tim gestures to visual] that’s a beautiful image—“you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall, which . . . [Tim laughs] okay. So I love the sunrise image—calves from the stall? Okay—but you know, again, this is [an] agricultural context. You know, most people are farmers of some kind, writing and reading the Bible. So, you know, this is: you’ve been cooped up in the pen all night long—waiting, waiting, waiting—and then released to go play and poop and eat and—you know [Tim laughs]—out in the field, out in the field. There you go. So that’s the idea here. That’s the idea.

So the day of Yahweh, is it good news or bad news? Both. So Amos, the prophet Amos—the people in Israel were looking forward to the day of Yahweh, because it would bring them vindication, and all the oppressive nations around them were supposed to exalt them. And Amos says, “No, no, no, no. You don’t want the day of Yahweh, because you’re a nation of injustice that’s neglecting . . . the treatment of widows and the poor. And you really don’t want the day of Yahweh to come because you will have to answer.”

He says it’ll be a day of darkness for some and a day of light for others. It’s bad news and good news. It depends on—[Tim gestures to visual] next point—depends on the trajectory of your life. Depends on what trajectory you’re on. So the Day of Judgment—Hebrew Bible and New Testament—is judgment according to what you’ve done.

Matthew 16, Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come [before] me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. Whoever wants to save his life will lose it. Whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world and yet forfeits his life, his very self? What can a man give in exchange for his life, his very self? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and he will reward each person according to what he has done.”

The Apostle Paul says, “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each may receive what is due him for the things done in the body, good or bad.” Revelation 20—this is the classic “judgment scene” in the book of Revelation—“Then I saw a great white throne, and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence. There was no place for them. I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened—”

Now, just for Bible geeks—so this scene right here—John, in this vision, he’s incorporating imagery from another very similar scene in the Hebrew Bible right here. Anybody? Bible geeks? Yeah, the book of Daniel. The book of Daniel, chapter 7, in which—where Daniel sees “the Ancient of Days,” and there’s a judgment—books are opened. So this book is the image of “God’s knowledge” of the deeds of humanity—“books are opened.”

“Another book was opened, which is the book of life”—some people were on that trajectory, and he has those people in a book. He has everybody in a book. “The dead were judged according to what they had done, as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it. Death and Hades”—what’s “Hades”? The grave—“gave up the dead that were in them. Each person was judged according to what he had done.”

This is just three. There’s many, many, many passages like this in the Bible: God’s judgment will be according to what we’ve done. And is this good news? So this is good news: like, we need to be held accountable for what we’ve done. And so if the world isn’t headed this direction—right?—if there is no accountability for what humans have done in God’s world—if there’s no final reckoning coming, then I would argue there’s no hope—there’s no meaning—there’s no purpose—there’s no accountability. There’s no hope, no hope for the world.

But if there *is* a final judgment, there’s no hope for me. [Tim laughs] It’s kind of a “catch-22,” you know what I’m saying? So I want there to be judgment for the whole world because that’s what’s right—that’s what gives meaning and purpose to my actions and everybody else’s actions. But the moment *my* life is put under the magnifying glass—you know what I’m saying?—like, *yeah*. So that’s the tension. That’s the tension, right?

And so this is where even—you know—this is Jesus saying this, right? Again, this isn’t “church underground” on salvation, and “grace and works,” and all that kind of stuff. You have to insert, here, all of the theology of salvation that—Paul’s idea [Tim gestures to visual]—and I have here that judgment according to works has to be understood in light of the fact that the Spirit is at work in you, if you’re a follower of Jesus—that because of the cross, you are forgiven evil works, and that you *truly can* obey Jesus. It may be really hard for you, but you really, really, really can do it—because the Spirit of God is in you, and you will be able to stand before God at the judgment. Insert that here [Tim gestures to visual].

But this is the basic idea—it’s the great Asize—it’s the “final reckoning.” And everything about that day hinges upon both the history of your life trajectory, but also your response to Jesus.

And so a couple [of] passages here: this is Paul—in Acts 17—this is Paul’s speech to the philosophers in Athens, in Greece, and he says—basically to the philosophers—he says, “You know, in the past, you thought God was, maybe like, represented by wood or stone or something like this.” And he says, “God’s overlooked your ignorance in the past. You’re now hearing the story of Jesus. In the past, God overlooked such ignorance, but he now commands all people everywhere to repent. He’s set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof to this—proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.”

There's a whole presentation of the story of the Gospel [that] Paul gives to these Greek philosophers. Whose name does he never mention? [Tim grins] He actually never says Jesus's name. He crafts the speech so well—every word is crafted. He crafts it right to their end. He quotes people that they like to read—he never quotes from the Bible. And he brings Jesus in right at the end, but he never says his name. He's giving them a framework.

So this is—Acts 17 is a beautiful example of how there is no “one way” that you need to present the Gospel. It depends on the situation. It depends on the audience. It's a story, and different elements of the story of the Gospel are relevant and special, and you need to always be aware of what's going on in the moment. “What are people going to receive right now?” Anyway, that's a whole other message. But that's Acts chapter 17.

2 Peter, chapter 3, verse 9, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” So what happens on this day—there's two elements that the Bible brings up. One is the trajectory of your whole life lived, *and* how you respond to Christ, and how you respond to the message of the Gospel.

Now, what this opens up for us is a whole set of questions—I don't think we're going to have time to talk about tonight. So we're talking about Heaven and hell, and these images and so on—but part of the reason why, for us, this is such an important question is: we want to know *who*. Correct, okay—and there's a whole series of questions in here, like: So what about people who have never heard the Gospel? So where do they stand if they've never even heard of Christ, and they come to the Day of Judgment? And yes, they're going to be accountable for their deeds, but they don't have any Jesus to turn to because they've never heard about—what is God going to do in that kind of scenario?

I have a handout on that that's sitting on that table that I'm going to give to everyone [Tim laughs], and maybe we'll get to it before the night's over—I doubt it. But let's at least say this: for anyone who *has* heard the story of Jesus, and can understand it as Good News that confronts them in their sin, and they say, “Don't want anything to do with that. Don't want anything to do with that”—and, whatever, for one reason or another—pride, whatever—they don't want to humble themselves. They don't want to repent. They don't want to own up to the fact that they're wrong. They don't think they need forgiveness, whatever. People in that category are people who will stand alone on judgment day, with their whole life, kind of, behind them, and they'll be held accountable.

And then there are those who respond to the Gospel, and who can look at their whole life lived and then say, “Help me, Jesus”—and that's the whole point of the cross, right? What that puts is a whole category of people who have not heard about Jesus, or who

were never able to hear the Gospel as good news, because it was either never presented to them [Tim laughs] as good news. It was presented to them as some distorted message, or whatever.

I think here, you know—there's, in Hindu, Muslim cultures—where Jesus only stands for like “America dropping bombs”—that's what they think of—[Tim laughs] you know what I mean? Like there's a whole lot of work that needs to take place for them to dissociate “Jesus” from “Western culture,” and to—and to actually hear and understand the Gospel.

And so they've maybe *heard* of Jesus, but they actually haven't heard the Gospel as good news. Where do those people stand? That's a whole set of issues that maybe we'll get to [Tim laughs]—but there's a handout there on the table, and we'll see where we go. Is that okay? I'm just isolating that. But everybody will be accountable for what they've done—how they've responded.

And that's the day of God's judgment. There you go. You know—in retrospect, I probably should have put in a whole section on that, but we'd have to go to like 1 a.m. Well, maybe we'll get there if I actually get moving on the outline here.

So “life *after* life after death.” So there's the final judgment, and there's resurrection. There's a resurrection of the dead. Remember, this is the intended purpose of humans—is embodied existence, not the schism between material and immaterial.

And so, where did this idea come from? We'll just do a quick, kind of, view of the story of resurrection. You read the Old Testament: what happens when you die, and what future is there for humans after they die? You read many places in the Hebrew Bible, and you read a passage like Job. Job says, “Just as a cloud dissipates and vanishes, those who go down to the grave will not come back. They are gone forever from their home, never to be seen again.” Resurrection anywhere here?

Ecclesiastes 3: “Man's fate is like that of the animals”—[Tim grins] don't read Ecclesiastes on, like, a gray, rainy day [Tim laughs]—or something, you know? So, read it on a bright sunny day, and it will ruin your day, right?—so “Man's fate is like that of the animals. The same fate awaits them both. One dies, so does the other. All have the same *ruakh*”—animating life energy. “Man has no advantage over the animal; everything is meaningless. All go to the same place. All come from dust and to dust all return. I mean, who knows if the *ruakh* of a man rises upward and the *ruakh* of an animal goes down to the earth? I don't know. Who can know such things? They all go to the grave. No hope; it's meaningless.” [Tim laughs] Right?

So there's lots of passages like this in the Hebrew Bible—lots of passages. But there is a handful—and they're mostly in the Psalms, which is interesting—in the poetic expressions of prayer and hope of the people of Israel—and you get “glimmers of hope”

that maybe God's faithfulness to his creation means, somehow, the grave is not the end.

So here's two passages. Psalm 49, "No man can redeem the life of another, or give to God a ransom for him. The ransom of a life is costly. No payment is ever enough." If my friend has just died, what can I do to, like, make him alive again? How much money can I go take to the temple and give to the priests to make him alive again?

"The ransom of a life is costly. No payment is ever enough that he should live on forever and not see decay. I mean, all can see wise men die, and the foolish and the senseless alike perish and leave their wealth to others. I mean, their tombs remain their houses forever; their dwellings for endless generations, even though they've named lands after themselves. But—but—God will redeem my life from the grave. He will surely take me to himself."

Whoa . . . So this is a poetic expression of hope. Even though all the author, the poet, can see around him is death—and that it's irreversible—he says there's something about that that just violates who God is. He's the creator. He's about life. He's about flourishing. So somehow, it's almost—you could maybe even say it's an "irrational" hope in the poem—he says, "He *has* to—God *has* to be able to redeem me from the grave. I can't do it. My neighbor can't do it. He can't pay me money. But God can do it. I don't know how, but he's got to."

So Isaiah, the prophet, he expresses it this way—and this is just straight up as a vision of the future. He says, "On this mountain"—[Tim gestures to handout] *Hmm*, in the book of Isaiah, the mountain always refers to . . . Jerusalem, Jerusalem—Jerusalem will be the center where God acts to rescue and bring life to the whole world—there you go. "On this mountain, the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples. A banquet of aged wine, the best of meats, and the finest of wine."

Baptists are going to have a real problem here because—[Tim laughs] that's right. Or actually anybody who's, like, got the "grape juice thing" going on with communion, right? Because we're going to be like, "What? So, so where's the grape juice, God?" [Tim laughs] Yeah, that's a joke. God is into really good wine.

"On this mountain, he will destroy the shroud." So here's the idea: for all nations, there's going to be this great banquet at the end of days, right? God is going to bring life somehow. All people will—it'll be like this huge wedding feast with wine and meat and good food and celebrating and so on. In scholarship, it's called "the Messianic Banquet"—and the imagery of the feast that will come—it's picked up in the book of Revelation too.

"On this mountain, he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all the peoples"—it's like a sheet that covers all the nations. What is that "shroud"? What is the sheet? "He will

swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away tears from all faces. He will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The Lord has spoken.”

Very dense, powerful little poetic prophecy here: that God’s purposes for the universe—for the world, for humanity—is for life and restoration. Like, you know, like—“What can I think of here? Like a wedding feast—like the most awesome experience ever.” And this idea that death is like a “sheet” or a “shroud” that covers everything—keeps light out, from people underneath it and so on—he says he’s going to [Tim makes sound effect], he’s going to “pull back the veil”—he’s going to do away with death.

So you have these hints—you have these “glimmers,” in the poets and in the prophets. The most clear description of the future hope of resurrection in the Hebrew Bible is in the book of Daniel, where it says, “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will wake up. Some will wake up to everlasting life”—literally, he says, “life of the age,” is the phrase in Hebrew that he uses. What’s he referring to? Think of the storyline here. [Tim gestures to visual] It’s referring to this, right here.

So in the biblical language, they don’t speak about “eternity,” they speak about “the age,” the “age to come,” the “age that is coming.” And often that word “age” is translated as “eternal” or “eternity,” in our English Bibles. So “life of the age. Others will wake up to shame and contempt”—literally: “to shame and an age of contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens; those who lead many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever.”

Does it say—does it say, “Those who are wise will shine in Heaven and be among the stars,” something like that? No, there’s a metaphor—this is a metaphor—that those who are resurrected to life of the new creation—life of the new age—and he just picks images here, they’ll *shine* like the sun—they’ll *shine* like the stars. And so the book of Daniel, right here, is like the key, bedrock of the idea of resurrection . . . resurrection—some to an existence along the trajectory of contempt, of shame, because they’ve rejected God—and others, who are on the trajectory of life and flourishing. Those are the two paths.

And so out of here comes, basically, where we’re going to take it from here is: what does the Bible have to say about each of those? What does the Bible say about resurrection unto the age of shame and contempt—or resurrection into life? And whether or not the Bible says those are two separate realities, if our language, “Heaven and hell,” has any meaning, it refers to this right here—this part of the story right here [Tim points to visual].

But Heaven is not really the best word to use, I think, because for most of us, “Heaven” is some, like, space that’s not physical. And as we’re going to see, resurrection and new creation [are] very, very physical.

[Musical break (26:34–26:37)]

All right, you guys, I hope this has been helpful for you to do a [Tim laughs] thorough dive into what the Bible is actually telling us about God, judgment, and the hope of resurrection and new creation. These are such profound ideas, full of hope for us and for our world.

[EMSB theme fades in]

And so I trust that they'll take deep root in your heart, as they have in mine over the years. So thanks for listening to "Exploring My Strange Bible." If you find this helpful, again, feel free to share it with a friend, or go on to iTunes and leave a review. So there you go. Thanks, you guys, for listening. We'll see you next time.

[EMSB theme fades out]