

# FAITH ASKING QUESTIONS



A ST FRANCIS COLLEGE SHORT COURSE

THE TRANSCRIPT

## Episode 6 Life, death and what comes next

### 6.4 What do Christians believe about heaven and hell?

**Jazz Dow:** Again, many things, there is no simple answer to this question. There are many things.

**Marie-Louise Craig:** You know when people say that, all that heaven and hell stuff, I think of all those jokes where people get up to the pearly gates and have to do something to get in but the other thing I think about is the interesting story Jesus tells about Lazarus and the rich man and he actually talks about Lazarus being next to Abraham and it's nice there, and the rich man is in hell and there's fire and thirst and he's obviously distressed and that's in a story Jesus tells, so ok, what do we do with that? Is there a heaven, is there a hell? And I guess, doing a lot of thinking about it I don't like beating people over the head with hell, so I would rather they focussed on heaven and had a good thing to aim for rather than something to run away from. That's a more positive way to think about it.

**Phillip Aspinall:** "Life, death and what comes next?" It's a bit of a mystery. Again, like all religious questions, people have struggled to absolutely pin it down. But the new testament gives us a number of glimpses of what it's like. First of all, I think there is something. Secondly I think it's about being with God. There's that wonderful passage in John's gospel where Jesus uses the image of the middle eastern caravan scout – the one who goes ahead of the camel train to make sure the water's there at the next camping spot and everything's organised – the caravanserai – Jesus describes himself as that. He says "I am going to prepare a place for you – in my Father's house there are many dwelling places", "I go to prepare a place for you and then I will come and take you so that where I am you will be also". So that's one image of what's to come, of our destiny – being with God and being with Jesus.

**Cameron Venables:** I think there are some very interesting images of heaven and hell and how we understand that is often shaped by paintings from the 15th century where you've got that great divide



where God is just the other side of the cloud, and hell, the hot place is just deep underground and you don't want to go underground, you really want to go up! So, if you look at Michelangelo's Last Judgement in the Sistine Chapel, there's God on a throne, and a little dove and Jesus the muscular judge separating, and the devil's pulling people down into a dark place who haven't made the grade.

Obviously, the ancient mind had that understanding of a three-tiered universe (just the other side of the clouds was heaven and underneath was hell) and that has made its way into the Bible. Writers of the Bible generally thought that the earth was flat and that the sun went around the earth and that the earth was the apex of creation. And now we have a world view which is informed by science, so we have to reframe our understanding of what heaven is and what hell is. So for me heaven is not a place just the other side of the clouds.

Who knows how those astronauts felt as they looked back on the earth – they didn't see angels flying around! For me heaven is a place with great relationship with God. A place in which only love is present, and if you like, hell is the absence of that. Its distance and coldness and numbness, so the opposite of love.

**Phillip Aspinall:** Another one that fills us with hope I think is in the book of Revelation where it talks about a new Jerusalem coming out of heaven, the transformation of everything we know in a new creation and we know that is on the way because of the resurrection. Jesus being raised is the "first fruits" the first sign of that new creation and the assurance that it's on the way. So revelation talks about a new creation in a new city where God will dwell with people when every tear will be wiped away and all the short comings of life as we know it now will be transformed and everything will be made whole – so that's another glimpse. But exactly what it will look like, nobody knows. Paul talks about we are sewn a physical body and we are raised a spiritual body so some of those things are not entirely clear, but I think we will be, and we will be with God is the heart of it.

**Marie-Louise Craig:** So, I say there are two things I know about this and the first thing is that what I decide in this life now is what I get when I walk through that gateway. We all learn John 3: 16 but we don't always remember John 3:17 and John 3:18 (and I paraphrase) what I do with Jesus decides what happens when I walk through that gateway. So, if I decide what I'm going to do with Jesus here and I accept what he's done for me then I don't have to worry about hell, but that's me personally. What do I do about people around me? It's out of my pay packet to judge whether they are going to heaven or hell. I'm not paid enough for that so I think it's important that I give people a hope of a future rather than worry about the negative side of that. I don't think the Bible is hugely clear about that, is just a story Jesus tells as illustration and there's no real mapped out theology about it. Go with read John 3 16, 17 and 18 and work on that.



**Jazz Dow:** One thing that I believe is that heaven starts now, there's a Catherine of Sienna quote "All the way to heaven is heaven." So eternal life starts now. So, if God offers life, that life doesn't change, that life is life in abundance and that begins now so in one sense, what heaven looks like isn't extremely important to me except to say that it's about the fulness of life. But that's not a life beyond this life only, that life needs to inform this life and so we need to live as if this were heaven "your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven."

You can find the video of this session, along with reflection questions for individuals or groups at [www.stfran.qld.edu.au](http://www.stfran.qld.edu.au) under "SFC Short Courses—Faith Asking Questions".

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