

Hell is a Bar in Adams-Morgan

BY JIM SOMERVILLE

Our best source of authority, the Bible, is far from definitive on the subject of heaven and hell. Striving to explain realities bigger than our capacity to comprehend, it strains and bumps against the limits of human language and imagination. And in the end, Scripture resorts to metaphor.

Hell is a bar in Adams-Morgan, the colorful ethnic neighborhood at the intersection of Columbia Road and 18th Street Northwest in Washington, D.C. Just above Hell and under the same management is a dance club called Heaven, where a six-foot bouncer in a pink leotard stands guard at the gate, wearing angel wings and a lopsided halo. It takes a good bit of courage to walk up the stairs and through the gate into Heaven, past that bouncer. It takes a good bit more to go down the basement stairs to Hell.

As your eyes adjust to the dim red lighting you see a banner over the bar that reads, "Welcome to Hell. Have a hell of a good time!" The walls are decorated with waxy masks and murals of grim reapers, skeletons, and doomsday scenes. A few tattered chairs and tables, complete with cigarette burns, are pushed to one side of the room. The mostly male patrons shoot pool and cackle above the gritty music blaring from the speakers.

It is the owner's vision of hell—and heaven—based on the most hackneyed clichés of each. But who's to say that hell is *not* a bar in Adams-Morgan, or that heaven is *not* a dance club? Our best source of authority on the subject, the Bible, is far from definitive. When it speaks of heaven and hell it strives to explain realities bigger than our capacity to comprehend. It

strains and bumps against the limits of human language and imagination. And in the end, like that bar in Adams-Morgan, it resorts to metaphor.

In the book of Revelation, for example, John sees a vision of heaven, which he describes as follows: "There in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald"

What we long to know in all of this is something about the real heaven and the real hell and what we find, to our great disappointment, is that they can't be known. Our end, like our beginning, belongs to God.

(4:2b-3). The heavenly city he describes in chapter 21 has foundations made of twelve different kinds of jewels and the streets are "pure gold, clear as glass." Obviously, there are not enough words, or not enough of the right kind of words, to describe what John saw. In the end

he holds out a handful of precious stones and blurts, "There! It was something like that!"

The same is true of hell. When Jesus refers to hell in the Gospels he frequently speaks of Gehenna, a valley just south of Jerusalem that was notorious as a place of child sacrifice in ancient times. In Jesus' time it was the garbage dump of Jerusalem, a place where columns of black smoke would rise constantly from burning refuse, rotting flesh, and human waste, a place where "their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched" (Mark 9:48). You can imagine his nodding in the direction of such a place when he says to his disciples, "If your right eye causes you to sin, poke it out. If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off. Better to go through life blind and maimed than end up in hell" (Matthew 5:30, paraphrase). And all who heard him would agree.

But is hell *really* a burning trash dump, or is heaven *really* a jewel-encrusted city? It's hard to know. While the biblical writers seem to be in general agreement that hell is a place of punishment for the wicked and heaven is a place of reward for the righteous, the particulars are varied and confusing. And Jesus, who should know better than anyone else, offers precious little help on the matter. While in one place he refers to hell as Gehenna, in another he refers to it as Hades. One is a putrid garbage heap while the other, apparently, is a place of flaming torment (Luke 16:23-24). Things are no better when he speaks of heaven. He assures his disciples that in his father's house there are many "mansions" (KJV), but tells the thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in Paradise," referring to a Jewish notion that the Garden of Eden was preserved in heaven as a reward for the righteous (Luke 23:43). So which is it, Jesus? Is hell a dump

or an inferno; is heaven a mansion or a garden?

What we long to know in all of this is something about the *real* heaven and the *real* hell and what we find, to our great disappointment, is that they can't be known. Our end, like our beginning, belongs to God. And if Jesus knows he isn't telling. He seems content to leave the details, like the details of the final judgment, in the hands of the father (Mark 13:32). And so, like the owner of that bar in Adams-Morgan, we resort to metaphor. We decorate our concept of hell with fire and brimstone, demons with pitchforks, and the screams of the damned. We decorate our concept of heaven with angels with halos, heavenly choirs, and streets of gold. We stretch our minds toward those unknowable realities. But in the end all we have is the best, and the worst, we can imagine.

The temptation is to leave it there, in the realm of imagination, but here is the frightening truth: as surely as God's ways are not our ways and God's thoughts are not our thoughts, neither is God's imagination our imagination. If burning in hell forever is the worst we can imagine, it is altogether possible that God can imagine worse, and altogether probable that the worst God can imagine would never cross our minds. But the corollary is also true: if heavenly mansions and streets of gold are the best we can imagine, it is altogether possible that God can imagine something better.

And altogether probable that he already has.



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