

25. Supernatural, Matthew 25:41

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels’.”

Question: Is there really a spiritual world active around me?

Trajectory Verses: Ephesians 6:12, Hebrews 1:14; Revelation 20:10

Heaven and hell, demons and angels, these are the fuel for science fiction and horror flicks. This makes them no less real. On the authority of Jesus alone, we can affirm them all. In fact, this single verse (Matt 25:41) at the tail end of Jesus’ final parable embraces all facets of the supernatural world. This essay is a simple survey with a single point—to raise our awareness that we are not alone in this world. There is an unseen reality raging all around. The war is real, and the spoils are human souls.

Fast Facts on Heaven

Most people believe the cartoon version of heaven. You know the one with naked cherubs covering their private parts with harps. They float on cloud nine and sing delicate chants resembling Medieval monks. If that is the real heaven, it is little wonder pagans are not so repulsed by hell. This version is both unpalatable and untenable. According to Scriptures, heaven is not a place that is monochromatic or “fluffy.” The robust description in Revelation 21-22 includes resurrected bodies, phenomenal banquets, a resplendent city 1,400 miles *square*, gigantic gates of single jewels, pavement of pure gold, and, of course, the tangible presence of God harkening back to the beauty of Eden. In addition to music there appears to be food, pleasure, rest, learning, celebration, and creativity. The real shock for most people is that we are not going to heaven but actually to the new *earth* where we will live eternally in corporeal bodies unstained by sin.

There’s a lot we don’t yet know about heaven like whether there will be any sex, the nature of our new bodies, or whether we retain painful memories from this life. Nonetheless, what we do know is compelling. There will be no police, soldiers, physicians, lawyers, or preachers. There is no need for Kleenex, clocks, locks, coffins, or courts. No longer will there be the IRS, INS, CIA, FBI, AARP, or CDC. Furthermore (and this is most extraordinary), without Satan, corrupt culture, time constraints, or arrogance, there is a real possibility of actual sinlessness. Let that sink in: We will have the realistic capacity to completely eliminate sin in our new bodies.

This destiny is not yet reality. Currently, anyone who dies in Christ will go to a place of comfort and peace that is described in only three places in the New Testament. According to Jesus’ story of Dives and Lazarus, the upside of death for the righteous is identified as

“Abraham’s side” (Luke 16:22). There the deceased saint was comforted from all earthly afflictions. Second, as Paul wrestled with his own “would-you-rather” he decides he should remain alive to serve the church even though death would bring him into the immediate presence of Jesus (Phil 1:21-26). The final passage describing the current state of deceased saints is from Revelation 6:9-11. While comforted with a white robe, they were still aware that the injustice on earth had not yet subsided. Each of these three passages actually raises more questions than they answer. In short, those who die in Christ, though comforted, still long for a new body and the ultimate justice of Final Judgment.

Fast Facts on Hell

Hell is a buzzkill! Who wants to talk it? For many it’s so offensive they snort with an air of superiority, “I can’t believe in a God who would send someone to hell.” Really? I can’t believe in a God who wouldn’t! For all of our politically correct discourse about social justice, how could we ignore eternal justice? How could a God remotely good ignore the pain and evil of this world? For this reason, the Bible’s description of hell undergirds justice, righteousness, and moral integrity.

According to Scripture, hell is a literal place of torment described with the metaphors of flames, sulfur, worms, darkness and gnashing of teeth (Isa 66:24; Matt 25:41, 46; Mark 9:48; 2 Thess 1:8-9; Heb 6:2; Jude 7; Rev 14:11; 20:10). Because it is describing future and spiritual realities, it’s difficult to know how literally to take the details. The images in our mind’s eye come more from the 11th century masterpiece, Dante’s *Inferno*, than the pages of Scripture. His imaginative description was more literarily creative and theologically accurate.

Technically speaking, Hell (or “Hades” to use the Greeks’ term) is only a temporary holding cell whereas the ultimate prison, not yet inhabited, is the Lake of Fire (Rev 20:10). It may seem excessive to throw someone in an eternal place of punishment for temporal sins on earth. Perhaps that’s because we fail to see sin from God’s perspective as mutiny against perfect holiness. Another truth that often eludes us is that a person’s damnation is not God’s desire but their own decision. Technically, God doesn’t throw people into hell. Individuals reject God’s presence; where else are they to go but to a place inhabited by those who refuse God’s rule. Let’s be frank, people who reject God on this earth have made their own hell here. Perhaps the descriptions in the Bible have less to do with God’s design than the environment unbelievers inevitably create for themselves apart from the control of the Holy Spirit.

Having said that, there is a group of conservative Bible scholars (Clark Pinnock, John Stott, Edward Fudge) who advocate a position called annihilation. In short, they argue that hell is eternal but punishment may not be. In other words, a person is sent to hell for an appropriate period. Once they have suffered according to their sins, their souls are forever extinguished as an eternal punishment. While that is not the dominant view among Evangelicals, it is not without biblical support. Scriptures teach that sinners will be destroyed

(Psa 37:2, 9-10, 20, 38; Mal 4:1-2; Mt 3:10-12; 10:28; Gal 6:8; 1 Cor 3:17; Rom 1:32; Phil 1:28; 3:19; 2 Pet 2:1, 3, 6; 3:6-7), using such words as "death" (Eze 18:20; Rom 6:23; Rev 20:14); "Destruction" (Psa 92:7; Mt 7:13; Phil 3:19; 2 Thess 1:9; Heb 10:39); and "perish." Some scholars argue energetically one side or the other. If pressed whether this is a viable option, perhaps the best response is "I hope you never find out."

Fast Facts on Demons

Demons are real and they are no joke. They know who Jesus is (Mark 1:24, 34) and believe in God (James 2:19) yet they choose to follow Satan (Eph 6:12), who is himself a fallen angel (Rev 12:7-9). They seek humans to inhabit (Matt 12:43). Yet they are innately destructive, causing their hosts to suffer blindness (Matt 12:22), deaf/mute (Mark 9:25), deformity (Luke 13:16), seizures (Matt 17:14-18), mental illness (Matt 11:18; Luke 7:33; John 7:20; 8:48, 52; 10:20, 21), and suicidal impulses (Matt 17:15; Mark 5:5). They tend to be loud (Mark 1:26), evil (Matt 12:43 11), and organized into a global force (Rev 16:14). While they yield considerable influence (Mark 8:33), they will ultimately be destroyed (Rev 20:1-10). Though they can perform some miracles (Rev 16:14), their power is limited (Rom 8:38; Rev 9:20).

Demons tend to get a foothold in a human soul through four conduits: Cultic activities (such as séances) and the classic trilogy of sex, drugs, and "Rock and Roll" (obviously meaning any musical style that honors the dark spiritual world). None of these are guarantees that a demon would gain access. They are, however, the most common conduits. **IMPORTANT NOTE:** The biblical term is not "demon possession" but "demonization." There are multiple levels or gradations of demonic influence:

1. Temptation—external situations that increase your access to sin.
2. Oppression—Physical or emotional harm caused by an external attack—accident, sickness, fire, death of a loved one, etc.
3. Influence—Mental influence or even control toward anger, depression, "voices" calling for violence or self-harm.
4. Possession—The physical body is controlled—different voice, control of hands or feet, eyes changing, supernatural strength, etc.

The deeper the level influence or control, the more aggressive the response must be. If someone is at level 3-4 it may require an experienced exorcist to intervene. It is complicated and messy. A helpful resource is Neil Anderson's, *The Bondage Breaker*.

For the vast majority of us there are three quick steps to minimize demonic influence: Scripture (reading or quoting aloud), worship music, and praying aloud in Jesus' name. Why do these work? Did you know that when Malls want to reduce the number and activity of teenagers, they play Barry Manilow? Why? Because for most teens this is like fingernails on a chalkboard. These three activities do the same thing for demons. Prayer, Praise, and Scripture drive demons batty. You can actually irritate them away, not completely or permanently, but it

will offer a reprieve for you during these activities. The more entrenched the foothold of a demon, the more radical needs to be our armament to defend from them.

This takes us to Ephesians 6:12, “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” Paul goes on to list the specific armament we have as Christians. The only offensive weapon is the sword of the Word of God. Interestingly, the word for “word” is not the printed text of the Bible, but rather the spoken word. It’s not enough to merely know theology. We have to claim the promises of God. As we open our mouths to testify to Jesus, especially in evangelism, the demons are put to flight or at least put on notice that their tactics won’t end well. The other offensive weapon in the passage (not part of the armament itself) is prayer. Paul uses three different words for the various petitions we lay at God’s throne. The believer that testifies by speaking the truth of God, singing the praise of God, and petitioning the living God are far more likely to come out less scathed in the spiritual battle they wage. Don’t play defense with demons; play offense!

Fast Facts on Angels

Angels pop up all over the place in the Bible. They are thickest in Luke and Acts (representing 48 of 184 mentions in the NT). The real hog, however, is Revelation with 77 angelic appearances. They have three primary functions. First and foremost, they are messengers. That’s actually the meaning of the Greek word *angelos*. Notice how angels always hover about the coming of Jesus whether it is his first coming or his final coming.

Second, Angels minister to Jesus and his people (see Psa 91:11-12; Mark 1:13). They comforted Jesus in Gethsemane (Luke 22:43), carried Lazarus to Abraham’s bosom (Luke 16:22), released the Apostles from prison (Acts 5:19; 12:7-15). An angel led Philip to the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26), another assassinated Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:23), still another predicted Paul’s safe arrival in Rome (Acts 27:23). In fact, Hebrews 1:14 says, “Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?”

Third, they validate God’s men by mere association. In other words, you stand an angel next to a guy, and he suddenly wears a white hat. This was true for Moses (Acts 7:35), Stephen (Acts 6:15), and Cornelius, the first Gentile Convert (Acts 10:3-4). Being in cahoots with angels marks a person as God’s selection. Thus, angels rejoice in heaven whenever a sinner repents (Luke 15:10). For Luke, the angelic connection functions as does tongues. It is God’s stamp of approval on an unlikely candidate. For wherever there is an angel, there also is God’s will and word.

Key Points:

- Heaven and hell are real places described in the Bible with the best metaphors available.

- Demons gain greater access through the occult, sex, drugs, and music. Conversely, they are hindered through Scripture, praise, and prayer.
- Angels assist humans by announcing Jesus whenever he comes, assisting believers to carry out their call, and affirming those God approves.

Action Step: Ask three Christian friends if they have ever encountered an angel or a demon. Try to learn from them how their experience (or non-experience) aligns with biblical descriptions.

Further Resource: Neil Anderson, *The Bondage Breaker* (2000).