

## **Faith Matters # 18 – Hell and Heaven – August 13**

Now, about hell and heaven: don't worry; I won't attempt a 2½ minute explanation of those complicated subjects. They're pretty hot topics. Especially "hell". No subjects have caused more confusion, dread and – alternative facts – than hell and heaven.

Beginning this autumn, there will be a "Faith Matters" series on Tuesday evenings that will deal with many of the topics introduced here on Sundays. And, as you can very well guess, "hell and heaven" will be included.

It was believed by most civilizations thousands of years ago that after death, all people went to an abode under the earth where they had a kind of existence. Those civilizations, whether Aztec, Babylonian, First Nations North American or Old Testament Hebrew – they all believed in some kind of life after death. They often went to great care to provide for the needs of the dead, as we see in Neanderthal burial sites and Egyptian pyramids.

The Old Testament referred to that abode of death by the Hebrew name "Sheol". Sheol was never a place of punishment or torment. Most of us have been brain-washed by the King James Version of the Bible that failed to quote that Hebrew word. It always replaced Sheol by the word "hell". Preachers who enjoyed giving "hell-fire and damnation" sermons felt it was a good way to scare people into heaven. The Psalmist says to God, "If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there" (139: 8).

But we still have to wrestle with the New Testament's reference to Judgment Day. In Jesus' parables, he says that all evil-doers will be thrown into the furnace of fire (Mt. 13:42), even those who gave no food and drink to the hungry and thirsty (25:42,45). How you read a parable is important. For example we don't believe there was an actual person called the prodigal son. Taking parables literally can lead to problems.

Whatever else we say about heaven and hell, we need to remember that God is love. That's where we must begin the study of those two – and indeed the study of all topics. God is love, and we are loved by God, come hell or high heaven.