

Do Bahá'ís Believe in Heaven and Hell?

Many people turn away from religion because of the concept of eternal burning in hell-fire. They cannot accept a God who burns His helpless creatures for ages and eons. Because so many people are affected by this concept, it is treated here in detail.

To be true to God's Word and fair to ourselves, we should not turn away from or ignore what we don't like. What we desire will not change reality. We should, rather, face the reality with full confidence and courage and without fear. Instead of ignoring this critical word or repressing it, we should investigate and understand it.

The Bahá'í perspective of hell and heaven differs sharply from traditional beliefs. Bahá'u'lláh teaches that heaven is nearness to God and hell remoteness from His presence. True happiness comes from fellowship with God, and misery from separation from His glory.

O SON OF MAN!

Sorrow not save that thou art far from Us. Rejoice not save that thou art drawing near and returning unto Us.¹ Bahá'u'lláh

Blessed is he that draweth nigh unto Him, and woe betide them that are far away.² Bahá'u'lláh

A heart devoid of love is hell on earth and points to one beyond. A man told his guest, "Our town offers many advantages. The main problem we have is with the people and the water supply." The guest replied, "That reminds me of hell. The main problem in hell is lack of loving people and living waters." The road to hell is paved with apathy, impurity, and injustice and in hell with "I wish I had...Why didn't I? Why? Why? Why?" This is what the biblical metaphor of "insatiable worm" means.

...hell...where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.

Mark 9:44-48

(For details, see *I Shall Come Again*)

People have a tendency either to dramatize the consequences of hell in fiery and fearsome terms or to take them lightly. Both extremes are inaccurate, unjustified, and unhealthy; the first leads to irrational and excessive fear, the second to apathy and a lack of concern for the consequences of one's deeds.

God sends an invitation to all people to enter paradise. Its doors are wide open, yet some people choose actions that prevent them from entering:

Verily, on the First Day We flung open the gates of Paradise unto all the peoples of the world, and exclaimed: "O all ye created things! Strive to gain admittance into Paradise, since ye have, during all your lives, held fast unto virtuous deeds

in order to attain unto it." Surely all men yearn to enter therein, but alas, they are unable to do so by reason of that which their hands have wrought.³ The Báb

He who is a true believer liveth both in this world and in the world to come.⁴ Bahá'u'lláh

Our Creator assures us that the key to the Kingdom is ours if we but stretch out our hands. He tells us that heaven, with all its glory and splendor, is our home if we but seek it with our hearts and souls.

Bahá'u'lláh makes this statement about the destiny of "the infidels"—the ones who deny God's new Messengers and Redeemers:

The souls of the infidels, however, shall—and to this I bear witness—when breathing their last be made aware of the good things that have escaped them, and shall bemoan their plight, and shall humble themselves before God. They shall continue doing so after the separation of their souls from their bodies.⁵

As the passage implies, at the very instant of death, even before the soul is separated from the body and before we have entered the next realm, all the veils of self-deception are removed from before our eyes. Suddenly, we recognize all the excuses we have used for denying God and His Messengers and for living a selfish life. The instant of "resurrection" arrives

before we have fully released the cord of life.

The Báb speaks of “pangs of remorse:”

This mortal life is sure to perish; its pleasures are bound to fade away and ere long ye shall return unto God, distressed with pangs of remorse...ye shall soon find yourselves in the presence of God and will be asked of your doings.⁶

The Báb defines both paradise and hell-fire as:

Paradise is attainment of His good-pleasure and everlasting hell-fire His judgment through justice.⁷

Heaven and hell are not places but conditions that can exist in both this world and in the next. To be in hell-fire is to be remote from God, the Source of all joys and perfections, and to sense a burning desire to attain His Presence.

The suffering in hell comes not only from being far from God but also from being close to the ungodly:

Paradise is decked with mystic roses, and hell hath been made to blaze with the fire of the impious.⁸

Bahá'u'lláh

Obviously there is not much joy in hell. What happens when a mass of joyless people get together? What happens when the fire of remoteness spreads from person to person? What happens when instead of saying “I am

glad” people keep saying, “I wish...If only...?” In heaven there is an abundance of perfume from “mystic roses,” in hell an abundance of burning desire for the joy of nearness to God. What a contrast!

Pleasing God is the master key to paradise. The following verses declare that heaven is for those who love God and please Him. How can we truly love God and please Him? By loving and obeying the One who speaks for Him. Obeying is the inevitable consequence of loving.

As to Paradise: It is a reality and there can be no doubt about it, and now in this world it is realized through love of Me and My good-pleasure. Whosoever attaineth unto it God will aid him in this world below, and after death He will enable him to gain admittance into Paradise whose vastness is as that of heaven and earth. Therein...the day-star of the unfading beauty of his Lord will at all times shed its radiance upon him and he will shine so brightly that no one shall bear to gaze at him. Such is the dispensation of Providence, yet the people are shut out by a grievous veil.⁹

Bahá'u'lláh

This quote equates God's love with paradise:

O SON OF BEING!

Thy paradise is My love; thy heavenly home, reunion with Me. Enter therein and tarry not.¹⁰ Bahá'u'lláh

Recently a relative of ours—a wonderful and well-educated Bahá'í—died at a young age. Soon after her death she appeared to her aunt in a dream. When her aunt asked her how everything was there, she said, “Better than we were told.” Then she added, “I appear to you the way I choose.” As evidence, she instantly changed the color of her dress. By saying, “Better than we were told,” she was referring to Bahá'u'lláh's references to indescribable glories and beauties beyond, such as the following statements:

Such is the station ordained for the true believer that if to an extent smaller than a needle's eye the glory of that station were to be unveiled to mankind, every beholder would be consumed away in his longing to attain it. For this reason it hath been decreed that in this earthly life the full measure of the glory of his own station should remain concealed from the eyes of such a believer.¹¹

We dare not, in this Day, lift the veil that con-cealeth the exalted station which every true believer can attain, for the joy which such a revelation must provoke might well cause a few to faint away and die.¹²

Know thou, of a truth, that if the soul of man hath walked in the ways of God, it will, assuredly, return and be gathered to the glory of the Beloved. By the righteousness of God! It shall attain a station such

as no pen can depict, or tongue describe. The soul that hath remained faithful to the Cause of God, and stood unwaveringly firm in His Path shall, after his ascension, be possessed of such power that all the worlds which the Almighty hath created can benefit through him.¹³

This life is a preparation for our final exams. If we wish to enter the heavenly mansions and see the banquet of the Kingdom, we must secure our permit here and now, in the days that are still ours. As Jesus declares, the doors will remain closed to late-comers and procrastinators (Matt. 25:1-13).

Our life here is like a grand piece of art. We hold a brush in our hand. We have a choice to make a masterpiece, a mediocre work, or a horrible design. Every act touches the canvas.

This world is a place of testing. The final certificate depends on the grades we earn here. Our Creator tells us how we should live, and then leaves us alone to choose the course of our destiny. Like a teacher, He leaves the responsibility for learning and applying the knowledge entirely to us.

God's great ingenuity does not lie so much in creating the universe as in designing human beings in such a way that all of them do not seek or desire all His heavenly gifts. Some take only a drop from His vast ocean of blessings, others a handful or a cup. But a few are content with nothing short of drowning themselves in His infinite,

ever-flowing, ever-enchancing riches and bounties. What keeps so many content with so little is one of the greatest mysteries in the universe. "The evangelist was approaching the finale of his fiery discourse, and his voice rose as he thundered out, 'Do you want to go to Heaven? Everyone who wants to go to Heaven, stand up!' The congregation rose as one, except for Jed Hatfield, the local ne'er-do-well. For a moment, the preacher was speechless, then he demanded, 'Brother Hatfield, don't you want to go to Heaven?' Jed looked up and drawled, 'Nope. These Tennessee hills is good enough for me.'"

We can only theorize that when God made the universe, He knew that some people love to "heap up their sins to the limit" (I Thess. 2:16) to become citizens of hell, and that others love to sanctify their souls to the limit to become citizens of heaven. Since God loves all people, He made sure that both groups could satisfy their desires. Astonishing as it may seem, many do everything within their power to become qualified for hell. They miss no opportunities to receive a space for their soul in "the fire" of remoteness from joy. The highway to heaven is quite smooth: It is paved with peace, love, harmony, hope, faith, and joy. The highway to hell is quite rough: It is paved with prejudice, anger, revenge, hatred, greed, and grudges. Yet, many choose the rough road straight to the

valley of death and remoteness from God.

Another potential God gave us is the ability to engage in self-deception. Without it, life would become extremely painful. Self-deception helps us conceal our true motives and extend our freedom of choice. Have you ever met anyone who believes he will go to hell? It seems everyone thinks he was made especially for heaven.

Atheist: "Do you honestly believe that Jonah spent three days and nights in the belly of a whale?"

Preacher: "I don't know, sir, but when I get to heaven I'll ask him."

Atheist: "But suppose he isn't in heaven?"

Preacher: "Then you ask him!"

While on earth we have two duties: first, to know, love, and glorify God; second, to prove our love and faith by good deeds, demonstrated best by serving others. We can express our deepest love for God by acknowledging His latest Redeemers, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Christ said that those who denied Him denied God. Bahá'u'lláh makes the same statement. The following statement from the Báb shows the consequences of denying the Redeemer of the age:

For if a prophet cometh to you from God and ye fail to walk in His Way, God will, thereupon, transform your light into fire. Take heed then that perchance ye may, through the

grace of God and His signs, be enabled to redeem your souls.¹⁴

In the following passages, the Báb reveals the blessings of remaining loyal to God's covenant:

There is no paradise more wondrous for any soul than to be exposed to God's Manifestation in His Day, to hear His verses and believe in them, to attain His presence, which is naught but the presence of God, and to partake of the choice fruits of the paradise of His divine Oneness.¹⁵

There is no paradise...more exalted than to obey God's commandments, and there is no fire...fiercer than to transgress His laws and to oppress another soul, even to the extent of a mustard seed. On the Day of Resurrection God will, in truth, judge all men, and we all verily plead for His grace.¹⁶

This world, in spite of its many pains and pressures, appears enchanting and glamorous. We often become so blinded by earthly glammers that we lose sight of heavenly glories. A little spiritual wealth is worth more than all the earthly riches, yet most people worry more about earning pennies than about entering paradise. Great Messengers seek to awaken us from our illusions of attachment to this planet, to draw our attention away from passing pleasures to the splendors of heaven:

Night hath succeeded day, and day hath succeeded night, and the hours

and moments of your lives have come and gone, and yet none of you hath, for one instant, consented to detach himself from that which perisheth. Bestir yourselves, that the brief moments that are still yours may not be dissipated and lost. Even as the swiftness of lightning your days shall pass, and your bodies shall be laid to rest beneath a canopy of dust. What can ye then achieve? How can ye atone for your past failure?¹⁷ Bahá'u'lláh

Life is brief but precious. We are moving with incredible speed. Our goal is to find the highway of happiness and the exit to heaven. If we hesitate to look and miss the chance, if we waste the precious gift of freedom that is ours, there is no returning. Today people are constantly rushing and running. Do they have a destination? "The loudspeaker of the big jet clicked on and the captain's voice announced in a clear, even tone: 'Now there's no cause for alarm, but we felt passengers should know that for the last three hours we've been flying without the benefit of radio, compass, or radar, due to the breakdown of some key components. This means that we are not quite sure in which direction we are heading. You'll be glad to know, however that we're making excellent time!'"

After passing from the earthly realm, all souls will have a chance to advance in the heavenly realm. Since everyone will have this chance, those farthest

from God here will, in relation to others, continue to be farthest from Him. This is why hell and heaven are said to be eternal. The consequences of how well we do here will stay with us always.

Whatever we weave here we will wear hereafter. After passing away, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá declares, the soul will continue its journey forward from "the degree of purity to which it has evolved during life in the physical body."¹⁸

As the womb is the place of preparation for this life, so is this life for the next. We should take advantage of every opportunity to attain the greatest growth possible. After passing away from this realm, we will not enjoy the unlimited opportunities we have had here. This world is a school. Our goal is to graduate with honor and distinction. The uniqueness and significance of this life lies in this: It determines our eternal destiny.

The conditions of the next life are beyond our comprehension. It is futile to try to know exactly what will happen or what everything will be like. Some day we will all make the journey. What we need most is patience and trust.

Our perception of the next life may be as perfect—or as imperfect—as that of children. These examples from *Angels Must Get Their Wings by Helping Little Angels Like Me* show what children think about heaven:

“Heaven is a place where girls get turned into angels. Then God tries to do the best He can with the boys.” “It’s a place where you could eat all the pizza you want and never get a tummy ache.” “Jesus is in heaven. He leads the prayers and I think He still likes to fiddle around and do some carpenter’s stuff with his dad.” “If you take a trip away from heaven, God will always leave the light on for you.” “Last one to enter heaven takes out the garbage. But don’t get too bummed out, because in heaven even the garbage smells real good.”

In the following statement Bahá’u’lláh offers insight into the afterlife:

Know thou of a truth that the soul, after its separation from the body, will continue to progress until it attaineth the presence of God, in a state and condition which neither the revolution of ages and centuries, nor the changes and chances of this world, can alter. It will endure as long as the Kingdom of God, His sovereignty, His dominion and power will endure. It will manifest the signs of God and His attributes, and will reveal His loving-kindness and bounty. The movement of My Pen is stilled when it attempteth to befittingly describe the loftiness and glory of so exalted a station. The honor with which the Hand of Mercy will invest the soul is such as no tongue can adequately reveal, nor any other earthly agency describe.

Blessed is the soul which, at the hour of its separation from the body, is sanctified from the vain imaginings of the peoples of the world. Such a soul liveth and moveth in accordance with the Will of its Creator, and entereth the all-highest Paradise. The Maids of Heaven, inmates of the loftiest mansions, will circle around it, and the Prophets of God and His chosen ones will seek its companionship. With them that soul will freely converse, and will recount unto them that which it hath been made to endure in the path of God, the Lord of all worlds. If any man be told that which hath been ordained for such a soul in the worlds of God, the Lord of the throne on high and of earth below, his whole being will instantly blaze out in his great longing to attain that most exalted, that sanctified and resplendent station...

The nature of the soul after death can never be described, nor is it meet and permissible to reveal its whole character to the eyes of men. The Prophets and Messengers of God have been sent down for the sole purpose of guiding mankind to the straight Path of Truth. The purpose underlying Their revelation hath been to educate all men, that they may, at the hour of death, ascend, in the utmost purity and sanctity and with absolute detachment, to the throne of the Most High.

The light which these souls radiate is responsible for the progress of the world and the advancement of its peoples. They are like unto leaven which leaveneth the world of being, and constitute the animating force through which the arts and wonders of the world are made manifest. Through them the clouds rain their bounty upon men, and the earth bringeth forth its fruits. All things must needs have a cause, a motive power, an animating principle. These souls and symbols of detachment have provided, and will continue to provide, the supreme moving impulse in the world of being. The world beyond is as different from this world as this world is different from that of the child while still in the womb of its mother. When the soul attaineth the Presence of God, it will assume the form that best befiteth its immortality and is worthy of its celestial habitation.¹⁹

Thus as Bahá’u’lláh indicates:

- The human soul continues to advance after its departure from the body.
- The nature of the soul cannot be fully described.
- The purpose of God’s Messengers is to prepare us spiritually not only for this life but for the next.
- The pure souls of the departed exert a profound impact on our lives.

- This world compared to the next is like the womb compared to this world.

Sacred Scriptures contain two critical words about hell. One is the “fire,” the other “forever.” This passage contains both these words:

Such as have believed in God and in His signs are indeed the followers of truth and shall abide in the gardens of delight, while those who have disbelieved in God and have rejected that which He hath revealed, these shall be the inmates of the fire wherein they shall remain forever.²⁰ The Báb

And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever.

Revelation 14:11

The word “forever” transcends human understanding, yet we should constantly ponder its meaning, for that is the most significant aspect of our nature. *Every thoughtful person should ponder the meaning and implications of this most critical word.*

Ages and eons must pass to regain the lost blessings and honors that can be ours even in a twinkling of an eye. The possibilities for spiritual advancement here are infinite. While on the earthly plane, it takes only a moment to decide to step from the darkness of denial into the light of hope and faith. Eternal joy is only one step away from eternal grief and sorrow:

O SON OF LOVE!

Thou art but one step away from the glorious heights above and from the celestial tree of love. Take thou one pace and with the next advance into the immortal realm and enter the pavilion of eternity. Give ear then to that which hath been revealed by the pen of glory.²¹

Every intelligent person should ask this question: Is it worth risking an eternity for a little negligence or inattention? Is it wise to ignore God’s numerous warnings for trivial reasons or excuses such as: “I am too busy,” “I am not interested,” or “I am happy with what I have”?

It is hard to imagine an act that would require so little effort and yet offer so much reward. It is hard to think of an act that would result from so little negligence and yet lead to such dire consequences.

This prayer should ascend from our hearts to Heaven on every moment of our lives:

All that I beg of Thee, O my God, is to enable me, ere my soul departeth from my body, to attain Thy good-pleasure, even were it granted to me for a moment tinier than the infinitesimal fraction of a mustard seed. For if it departeth while Thou art pleased with me, then I shall be free from every concern or anxiety; but if it abandoneth me while Thou art displeased with me, then, even had I wrought every

good deed, none would be of any avail, and had I earned every honor and glory, none would serve to exalt me.²² The Báb

We often complain about adversity—poverty, pain, despair, grief, disease, unemployment, depression, failure, and loss—and do everything within our power to avoid them. Yet we seldom think of a far greater adversity—remoteness from God for all eternity—and do little to avoid it. This prayer from the Báb speaks to this point:

O my God! O my Master! I beseech Thee by Thy manifold bounties and by the pillars which sustain Thy throne of glory, to have pity on these lowly people who are powerless to bear the unpleasant things of this fleeting life, how much less then can they bear Thy chastisement in the life to come—a chastisement which is ordained by Thy justice, called forth by Thy wrath and will continue to exist for ever.²³

We have total control over the heaven and the hell we create in both worlds. Love on earth leads to splendor, glory, and peace in heaven; hate on earth leads to sadness, grief, and pain in hell. An open heart to God’s invitation on earth leads to an open gate to His heavenly banquet. A closed heart to God’s invitation on earth leads to a closed gate to His heavenly banquet.

The greatest and most splendid crown of honor and glory a human being can

ever acquire is recognizing the Redeemer of the age, loving Him, and living by His law. At death, each soul carries this precious crown from here to hereafter. To live and have an opportunity but fail to gain this glorious crown is a loss unimaginable. It is infinitely greater than all the losses, failures, and tragedies a human being can encounter over a lifetime. For no matter how severe the pains, they will pass away; but the pain of denying the greatest gift that God gives to human beings—His supreme Messengers and Redeemers—will endure for all eternity.

Better is guidance for him who is guided than all the things that exist on earth, for by reason of this guidance he will, after his death, gain admittance into Paradise...Hence God desireth that all men should be guided aright...However, such as are conceited will not suffer themselves to be guided. They will be debarred from the Truth, some by reason of their learning, others on account of their glory and power, and still others due to reasons of their own, none of which shall be of any avail at the hour of death.²⁴ The Báb

The following passage from the Gospel shows that “eternal life” is bestowed on those who recognize God and His supreme Messenger Jesus Christ:

Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. John 17:3

Honoring the One God sends is absolutely essential:

He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him. Christ (John 5:23)

The same principle holds true today. The Spirit is the same, only the name has changed. To gain eternal life, we must acknowledge the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, who are sent for our time. What is the opposite of eternal life? It is spiritual “death.” In God’s sight, anyone who rejects His Redeemer has rejected Him and is counted as spiritually dead. For some people this awareness may be too painful, but it is everyone’s right and responsibility to know.

Here are some Bahá’í prayers for the departed:

O my God! O Thou forgiver of sins, bestower of gifts, dispeller of afflictions!

Verily, I beseech Thee to forgive the sins of such as have abandoned the physical garment and have ascended to the spiritual world.

O my Lord! Purify them from trespasses, dispel their sorrows, and change their darkness into light. Cause them to enter the garden of happiness, cleanse them with the most pure water, and grant them to behold Thy splendors on the loftiest mount.²⁵ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

O my God! O my God! Verily Thy servant, humble before the majesty of Thy divine supremacy, lowly at the door of Thy oneness, hath believed in Thee and in Thy verses, hath testified to Thy word, hath been enkindled with the fire of Thy love, hath been immersed in the depths of the ocean of Thy knowledge, hath been attracted by Thy breezes, hath relied upon Thee, hath turned his face to Thee, hath offered his supplications to Thee, and hath been assured of Thy pardon and forgiveness. He hath abandoned this mortal life and hath flown to the kingdom of immortality, yearning for the favor of meeting Thee.

O Lord, glorify his station, shelter him under the pavilion of Thy supreme mercy, cause him to enter Thy glorious paradise, and perpetuate his existence in Thine exalted rose garden, that he may plunge into the sea of light in the world of mysteries.

Verily, Thou art the Generous, the Powerful, the Forgiver and the Bestower.²⁶ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

1. *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh* (Arabic), no. 35.
2. *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 57.
3. *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, p. 145.
4. *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 120.
5. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 170-171.

6. *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, p. 162.
7. *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, p. 158.
8. *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 133.
9. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 189.
10. *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh* (Arabic), no. 6.
11. Shoghi Effendi. *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980, p. 108.
12. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 9-10.
13. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 161.
14. *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, p. 147.
15. *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, p. 77.
16. *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, p. 79.
17. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 321.
18. *Paris Talks*, p. 66.
19. Motlagh, Hushidar. *Unto Him Shall We Return*, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985, pp. 9-11.
20. *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, p. 167.
21. *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh* (Persian), no. 7.
22. *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, pp. 187-188.
23. *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, p. 204.
24. *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, pp. 95-96.
25. *Bahá'í Prayers*, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991 edition, pp. 45-46.

26. *Bahá'í Prayers*, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991 edition, pp. 46-47.



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