

“Conversations with Harry Reeder and Bruce Stallings”

Part Forty

February 14, 2021 • Sunday Evening

We will first look at I Thessalonians 4 as I cover a few things in our series ‘if I should die before I wake.’ I find it interesting that our study on the Apostles’ Creed led into this series when the Creed talks about the Spirit of Christ being in Sheol for three days. The part of Sheol Christ went to was paradise, heaven but not the final heavens and new earth. Then His body goes to the grave and then His body and soul are reunited which is the very picture of what will happen in the ultimate resurrection in the new heavens and the new earth. As we get into this you see that what Christ has done before us is exactly what we will encounter. As I have said before that prayer our grandmothers and mothers taught us was true that goes;

*Now I lay me down to sleep,*

*I pray the Lord my soul to keep;*

*If I should die before I wake,*

*I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

The reason you say ‘my soul to take’ is because soul is the essence of you. This body will one day be set aside but that soul doesn’t die. That soul continues and that’s what makes you, you.

When Adam was made from the dust of the ground, he was made dust of the ground in a corpse until God breathes into him the breath of life. When the spirit or soul was breathed into him, he was then declared made in the image of God. There is a material part of you that comes in the image of your parents and there is the immaterial part of you – soul/spirit/mind/heart – that makes you exist in the image of God. We have death because of sin. We don’t have a Darwinian life view that death is a part of this cosmos for it is an intruder. It was an enemy that was brought in by our sin. Romans 6:23a says [23a] *The wages of sin is death...*

There are three kinds of death. There is physical death – separation of the soul from the body. Spiritual death is separation of the person from the Lord because of our sin and then eternal death that includes the lake of fire where death is eternal. It is not an annihilation but it’s an actual separation from God’s felt presence that which everyone enjoys even if they are not believers, but not His actual presence. We see this in Psalm 139:7–8 which says [7] *Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? [8] If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!* On earth we experience God’s common grace because His reign falls on the just and the unjust, where God’s felt presence to some degree is encountered by everyone as it restrains those who are totally depraved from being absolutely depraved. The anticipation for the believer is the new heavens and the new earth for those who are in Christ.

There is also the certain expectation of eternal condemnation in Gehenna. This is not the intermediate torment of hades, the abyss, whereby unbelievers go and fallen angels are consigned, but for the believer there is the place of the new heavens and the new earth. The metaphorical language used to describe hell and heaven carry throughout the Bible. For instance, the heavenly Jerusalem where we go when believers die spiritually will then come down for the new heavens and the new earth. That Jerusalem will then be on the new earth. It’s interesting how we sing about the streets of gold but in the book of Revelation it say “street” of gold and it’s not plural. So we’ll all get to live on Main Street when we get to heaven with a very simple digit code in the presence of the Lord. There is no back alleys or setting aside in

heaven. Everyone who is in Christ and Christ is in them will enjoy the presence of the Lord together.

We have about three more studies in this series and the next study will cover the new heavens, the new earth and the lake of fire, Gehenna, which are the places of the eternal abode – the believer will be in the new heavens and the new earth and the unbeliever will be apart from the Lord in the lake of fire in rebellion against the Lord, under the judgments of God for everlasting torment in hell. That doesn't happen without two things – the second coming of Christ and the Judgment Seat. We will also look at the degrees of judgment in hell and the rewards of heaven from the Bible and how we are to understand that.

I want to start this Q & A by reading one of my favorite passages in I Thessalonians 4 that kind of wraps some of this up for us. I Thessalonians 4:13–18 says *[13] But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep* (euphemism for the death of a Christian, doesn't use death because the terror of death has been removed for the believer), *that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.* (Believers still grieve over not being able to be with their loved ones here on earth but can rejoice they will be with them one day in heaven, but we don't grieve as those who have no hope for our grief is informed by the hope that is secured in Christ.) *[14] For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep.* (When Jesus comes back those coming with Him are those believers who died before He returned. They can't come back with Him when He comes unless they are with Him right now.) *[15] For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.* (Believers still alive right now are not better off because those who have already died are already with Him. Those coming with Him will also have their new bodies before those who are still alive when He comes.) *[16] For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.* *[17] Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.* (Those caught up when the Lord returns will then get their new bodies.) *[18] Therefore encourage one another with these words.*

When Jesus ascended to the throne from earth it says that He rose in the clouds and it says in the same manner we'll see Him coming again in the clouds. I believe that's Biblical language referring to the Shekinah glory of God. There was the cloud of God's glory that fell upon the tabernacle. This is referring to being caught up into the glory of the Lord forever – the clouds – it doesn't just mean it's going to be partly cloudy that day. That is the language of clouds in the Bible – the Shekinah glory. Also, we will look closer at the second coming of Christ and to give you a heads up, I believe there is only one second coming of Christ. I don't believe there are two or two and a half. When we get to this, we'll look at what the Bible says about it. In this I Thessalonians passage it is clear there is only one second coming of Christ. This is part of discipleship as we know we are saved in life and in death.

Now let's get started with our questions for this time.

Bruce: The first question is, it is commonly stated that heaven is very simply the presence of God and hell is the absence of God, is that correct?

Harry: The answer is yes and no. Yes, in that I believe hell is the absence of the felt presence of God. By definition of who God is, God is everywhere, even that which He creates which would

be hell itself. There are some who say unbelievers ought not push back on the doctrine of hell because in life you didn't want Him so in eternity you don't get it. My problem with that, is that yes in life they don't want Him but they do want His presence. Listen to an atheist hit his finger with a hammer and what comes out of his mouth next. He calls on God and that's why when the Bible speaks of the sending from the Judgment Seat of men and women to eternal condemnation the language used is that they are 'thrown/hurled/cast into hell.' There is no 'oh yeah that's what I wanted anyway.' This doesn't mean I believe they become repentant for on the contrary when the Bible says there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth that is a temper tantrum against God. The gnashing of teeth is what they did to Stephen when he was stoned. It was an anger tantrum upon him.

Bruce: Is the fire mentioned about hell literal and if so what are the ramifications of that? If not, is that just simply symbolic?

Harry: There is the same issue about heaven when people want to know if there are pearly gates or gold or is that metaphorical language that is reaching for something. It is symbolic language by definition never ascends to the substance of what it is describing. So all that is said about heaven I think is symbolic language meaning it is greater for it was the best language the Holy Spirit inspired authors came up with. People here give everything for gold but we throw it out and walk on it in heaven for that's paving material in heaven. It's just telling us that heaven is so glorious and the things that you think are the most glorious here don't even compare what it will be like to be with Jesus forever.

I think the same thing is true about hell. Here is how I'd like to describe metaphoric or symbolic language to try to make this more clear. Could it be a literal fire? Yes. Could it be a literal outer darkness? That is a very interesting phrase – outer darkness – for it means darkest darkness. The final state of the impenitent in hell is not one with any relationships. You not only lose the felt presence with God but you lose the felt presence of everyone. We were made for relationships. You see what has happened when people have to quarantine with this recent pandemic. Have you ever wondered why they do isolation cells in terms of punishment and what happens to people who are put in isolation? That is punitive. Outer darkness is just saying there is no light, no hope and absolute isolation from the felt presence of God and anyone else, no relationships. I used to use that stupid conversation language of 'I'll be in hell with the rest of my friend' so I want to make this as clear as I can to you now. Think of it this way – we're made in the image of God and if hell is the lost felt presence of God then that would require the lost felt presence of human beings made in the image of God. Everyone of us are born with a ticket for that place unless you come to Jesus who cancels that ticket and purchases you another ticket to be with Him forever. If there is not a literal fire and that is symbolic, you will have wished it wasn't because the reality will be worse than the symbol.

Bruce: Can a Christian lose their salvation and go to hell instead of heaven so how can we be sure?

Harry: The Bible is very clear that God is just. If you are in Christ and Christ is in you and are truly converted, then Jesus has bore your hell and God does not put you under double jeopardy. He doesn't require two payments for one sin. So, if you are in Christ and Jesus paid for your sins then you are forgiven.

So, what about people who say they are in Christ and then go off into this evident sinful life? Say, they went to church, was baptized but then there was no fruit. If there is no fruit there is no root but that doesn't mean they got saved and got lost. It meant they were deceitful and duplicitous for whatever reason. There are many who say they want to be a Christian because they want the benefits of the cross but they don't want the crown – they don't want the demands of Christ as King. That means they are not truly converted.

Here is what John says in I John 2:19, *[19] They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.* So, if there is no fruit there is no root. Now, there is some fruit 30 fold, 60 fold and 100, but as I have said, if there is no fruit from the shoot then there is no root and that is what that is revealing.

I believe when we get to heaven there are going to be some Christians that I was wondering about their salvation but I believe there is going to be a lot of people that I thought were going to be there that won't be. I have merely quoted Jesus when He said in Matthew 7:21–23, *[21] “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. [22] On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ [23] And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness.’* They had a lot of religious activity but they didn't have Him. All it was, was wood, hay and stubble.

What is eternal life? Jesus told us what eternal life is in John 17:3 which says *[3] And this is eternal life, that they know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.* Another word for this is theology. I'm not talking about dry, cold theological percepts but I'm talking about knowledgeable, intimate, deep relationship with Christ. The key to your big life with Jesus is to know the bigness of your God. I remember in my student pastorship a lady came up to me frustrated with all this doctrine and said 'I just want to feel better.' I said to her 'I'm trying to give you metrics to understand your feelings because I don't want you to build a Christian life on your feelings but on the Word so you can understand, instruct and interpret your feelings.'

Bruce: Can you see someone's soul?

Harry: I thought I could growing up because I used to watch Soul Train before I got converted, but I don't think you can see a soul. I think you can see what is in the soul manifested in life. Psalm 103:1 says *[1] Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name!* So, when people want to praise God in spirit and in truth then that shows something is filling their soul and you know something about the soul of what is coming through the heart and the mouth and in the life. You can see the result of a soul that is alive in Christ and that is being filled with Christ.

Bruce: There were accusations about sexual misconduct that came out last fall about Ravi Zacharias, of course he has since died, but his ministry did an independent investigation which has now been made public, so how should we respond to moral failures of such a public Christian figure?

Harry: I have to say it was very difficult for me to preach today because this news about Ravi has so burdened my soul. Ravi was not a close friend but I had known him for a long time. Jim Boyce introduced him to me when we did the Cambridge Declaration back in 1996. I had the privilege to speak with him here and we've have had the privilege to have him here a couple of times. We have to same Christian pedigree where we were both from the Christian Missionary Alliance. There is so many layers to this and I'll just give you a couple of them.

I have already done a Today in Perspective on this because his ministry already had a preliminary report and I had to speak to it for various reasons. We will probably do another one due to the final report now being made public. Another reason this was difficult was that I had known this was coming but I couldn't talk about it. We did not want to get ahead of the RZIM board who had commissioned and paid for this full investigation. I think they have admirably handled this appropriately. I would suggest that you at least read their opening letter about this situation because it was very well stated and done. You may or may not want to read the report for various reasons. This report seems to have been substantiated and beyond substantiation as well. My heart goes out to his wife, his children, his extended family and the employees of RZIM that have been affected by this. I'm sure the ministry is going to close down.

There are some obvious lessons we can learn from this. One is that God uses people in your life but you should never build your life on instruments that He uses because you don't really know everything about those instruments. I have said many times that Christians need models for their life but don't get your models from contemporary people. Get your models from those in the Bible for the Bible is honest about everybody and get your models from history because we know the last chapter of their life, we know how they finished. You need to get mentors from the present but get your models from history or the Bible. We need models because we're imitators. Use your models for they are signposts but fix your eyes on Jesus. Don't get into a cult of personality – theologically, ecclesiastically, politically, socially or academically. You're a Christian so fix your eyes on Jesus. God can use people that don't even know Him in your life. God can use people who do know Him and their imperfections in your life. Truth is truth but even if someone speaks truth it doesn't mean they are saved.

Some have asked me is Ravi was saved and my answer is 'I don't know because I don't know his soul, his heart.' I will say that is a fair question to ask. One may say 'What about David in the Bible?' David repented. When Nathan brought the charge of God's Word against him, he repented. When these reports surfaced about Ravi there was no repentance. On the contrary, there was avoidance and the destruction of other lives so that's a concern for me. This is part of my plea about this next generation, trying to get them up to the Lord and trying to get them some good models and mentors in their life.

Here's another lesson. The first bell that rings in your life is a secret life. This was a study that developed a secret, deceitful life. Stay transparent. Stay accountable. This next statement is true but not conclusively true. If you'll look back over the last 40 years and all the failures that get to our soul, most of them are celebrity leaders who are not pastors of churches or they are celebrity leaders and they are a called pastor of a church but don't operate like a pastor in a church. They operate more like celebrities in the church. I am a presbyterian by conviction due to my study of the Scripture on the plurality of leadership, connectional church government, covenantal relationships, but there is this principle in Scripture of accountability and submission and it was the only system I saw where every member, minister and leader of every church is accountable to somebody. I knew I needed that. I actually needed more than that to where I

have been meeting with three men for over 38 years on a regular basis, holding each other accountable. When I came to Briarwood the elders graciously set up eight men to hold me accountable and meet with me regularly to throw the flag in my life if necessary. This is not strength in my life but being aware of the weaknesses in my life. You don't build a secret life, you build an accountable life, a transparent life. Don't have another computer, iPhone or another this or that. You ought to have flags going up everywhere if you're rationalizing that.

On the one hand, I'm kind of glad Ravi felt the need to rationalize what he was doing, but there are always rationalizations. Everyone who has plummeted says things like 'You don't know the pressures I'm under, you don't know this, I deserve this.' Satan is unbelievably deceitful on this stuff. You need leaders in your life but you don't need celebrities. You need pastors in churches that act like a church with accountability, transparency, pastoral preaching, pastoral teaching and elder shepherding. This is what you need in your life. Quit running to the next program or personality.

How many times do you have to be warned? I can give you eight in the last two years. People know I love R.C. Sproul, so was he itinerant? No. RC was on a church staff in Cincinnati and he was the pastor at St. Andrews and he would tell you that took all precedent over Ligonier Ministries in his life. He would tell you the greatest joy in his life was being a pastor and working under and alongside of the elders at that church. I believe that's where you begin to look. That is why all the mentors in my life were pastors of churches that acted like churches, not perfect but acted like churches. This is one of the lessons to learn in this.

Probably the most troubling thing is, not only did Ravi not own it when it came and had studiously developed this over decades with much collateral damage in people's lives, but what really pains me (although I'm pained for his family) is that as you move to the end it seems to me that he would have wanted to get it right knowing he was dying. The Bible tells us that some sins become evident on this side and some sins become evident when you go to the other side but know that your sins will find you out. What a man sows, he reaps.

Yes, we have removed Ravi from our radio and his books from our church bookstore plus the reading list in our seminary. I think we have to be careful here because truth is truth no matter who says it. If God can use a donkey and a presbyterian preacher there is two right there so we recognize that, but in the midst of something like this there is clearly a relationship. We don't want to cancel the message but we do want to recognize that when you carry something like that you have to in the immediacy of the situation you are as it were affirming the messenger as well as the message. Ligonier has gone through the same process we are going through because Ravi was a regular at Ligonier Ministries.

Bruce: I have sent people Ravi's materials on apologetics who are searching, so what do you say to those people who then say 'there you go and that makes everyone of his claims false.'

Harry: Here is what you say to those who want to attack his material. The framing principle of reformed theology is that all Scripture is inspired by God. Our only rule of faith and practice is the Bible. The reason they didn't start chapter one of the Westminster Confession with God is because people don't know God without the Word of God. You can know the Word of God and not know the God of the Word but you can't know the God of the Word without the Word of God. We are people of the Book, not people of the preachers.

This is why Paul says in I Corinthians 3:4-7 [4] *For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human? [5] What then is Apollos? What*

*is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. [6] I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. [7] So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.* We are people of the Book through the power of the Spirit of God.

So, you can respond to someone by saying, ‘We appreciate what Ravi wrote but not because Ravi wrote it but because it was faithful to God’s Word.’ Because of Ravi that doesn’t discount God’s Word, on the contrary, God’s Word would tell us that this is coming. This is another confirmation of God’s Word that we put no confidences in princes, in flesh.

Bruce: One of the pieces of legislation that has hit the Alabama legislators is the gambling legislation. How do we make our voices heard and fight this legislation? I know it’s early but any initial thoughts on this?

Harry: I need to do a little filtering here. I have done a Today in Perspective on this which people can hear now and it won’t be the last one. I want to thank the Lord for one of our elders who is a senator and one of the few who has spoken out on this issue. This was an issue when I first came to Briarwood in 1999. I’m grateful for Briarwood’s engagement on this issue and to defeat it when we were told it was undefeatable. Sixty to Seventy percent wanted this in our state and was voted down roundly. I’m grateful for the leadership in this church. Our own Gary Palmer is now a congressman and had great leadership at that time. There was more than him and I don’t want to start naming all of them, but what is concerning me now is that I don’t hear people taking on this fight. I hear them giving up and wanting to manage it instead of confront it. I think it needs to be confronted.

I don’t think you manage sin, you mortify sin and this is sin. This is predatory and this is a lack of leadership to discipline ourselves in this state. We have plenty of resources to do what we ought to do if the time was taken to make the tough decisions to make our budget be what it ought to be to do the right things for the citizens of this state. We don’t need a façade of a pot of gold that is actually a cesspool that will destroy the social fabric for it is predatory on the people who have the least money for something like this. You won’t find billboards for the lottery in Mountain Brook – a well to do neighborhood. That is why these millions of dollars are put up there. It is a fool’s gold with empty promises. You have about as much chance of winning the lottery as you do to get eaten by a shark tomorrow when you get out of bed. This is what we are selling people so that we don’t have to make the leadership decisions.

People tell me that people want to vote on it but that doesn’t mean you have to bring a vote on it. It means they elected you to make certain votes for them. I think it’s a failure of leadership, a predatory promise, a regressive tax which would put the best spin on it and it’s destructive to marriages, lives and families. Go to a state where there is a lottery as they promise millions of millions of dollars for education and it’s not true and it won’t be true in the state of Alabama. We need leaders who will take this on and now it looks like it is coming for a vote because it will require a constitutional amendment so we need leadership once again to step up, perhaps by God’s grace it can be denied.

Back in 1999 I was grateful to be a small part of getting rid of this blight. I wish I could show you what it is doing to the states that have it and education. I would pray those states would get liberated from it but I am going to do everything I can to speak to this issue for I believe this is a stewardship issue, a life issue and all of that. Part of my job as a pastor is to

make disciples with the Gospel, teaching people the whole counsel of God and why “gambling” is considered a moral evil from the Word of God and what it does. It doesn’t mean that Briarwood becomes the anti-gambling church. It just means we preach and teach the whole counsel of God. When an issue comes up like this, if we do our job of discipleship right then we’ll raise up other ‘Gary Palmer’s’ and other this and other that, who will walk into life and give us leadership out there on this issue. I need to have a lot more thoughts about it.

My dear friend, John MacArthur has done a number of series on gambling that I would encourage you to listen to that are really good. I probably need to go back and listen to them again as well.

Bruce: The is a question from your wife; do you consider the movie The Outlaw of Josey Wales a romantic valentine’s day movie?

Harry: Yes, absolutely and I’m sure that is what she was afraid of. The television version movie The Outlaw of Josey Wales is the greatest movie ever made for any occasion and that’s it.

Bruce: Last question which is a layup, why should a Briarwood member prioritize the missions conference?

Harry: The missions conference just brings some focus to what we are here at Briarwood. We are on mission, on message and in ministry. We do missions work here but we can’t get everywhere even though we’re called to go everywhere so that means God raises up people who can do cross cultural missions. We looked at the Bible and when Paul did missions, he went to a city, did evangelism and discipleship, church planting and church strengthening and then he did Gospel leadership development and deployment. To be on our missions’ staff you have to be doing one of those things. That is what we send people out to do and we partner with you by prayer, finances and personal engagement and encouragement. During the conference you get a chance to meet your prayer investments and faith promise investments. This year there won’t be as many in person due to the pandemic so we’ll be doing some of the meetings electronically and I’m excited about what the Global missions’ team has put together for us. I think this will be a great opportunity for us. We are going to keep pressing on this present distress. John Curry will be our conference speaker. It usually takes longer to plant a church internationally than it does nationally historically so we develop relationships with these people over a period of time. That is what we do here, we plant churches.

We believe at Briarwood that there is something called church. It has a mission, a message and four ministries – the ministry of upreach (worship), the ministry of outreach (evangelism), the ministry of inreach (love and spiritual gifts developed) and the ministry of downreach (discipleship). This is what we believe. Now, we want to get people who are gifted to go put there – this is what church is, what does it look like in Malawi, in that language, in that culture. You don’t start with the cultural and figure out the church you want. You start with the Bible – what is Christ’s church, its mission, its message, its ministry. Now, how does it land through gifted people that know how to put it in that location in that generation and you will get the chance to meet some of these people we support who are doing this. I’m excited and I hope you are too. God bless you.