



Essential Eschatology: Our Present and Future Hope
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"If eschatology is a casualty of scholarly and popular culture, Essential Eschatology artfully resurrects its place in the Christian faith. Phelan weaves together theology, church history and biblical studies, producing a remarkably interdisciplinary treatment of the doctrine of eschatology. I put Phelan's book on my shelf next to N. T. Wright and Scot McKnight who also write accessible biblical theology for the whole church!"

—Michelle A. Clifton-Soderstrom, associate professor of theology and ethics, North Park Theological Seminary

A Vision of Heaven and Hell

I have argued that all descriptions of heaven and hell are metaphorical. The descriptions speak of a reality that can only be expressed in analogies and pictures. The place of judgment can be described as a place of darkness, flame or deep water while the heavenly city is depicted as a Middle Eastern walled city with gates of pearl and streets of gold. One of the most powerful attempts to paint a contemporary picture of heaven and hell is found in C. S. Lewis's 1946 book *The Great Divorce*. Hell is depicted as a gray, gloomy city full of quarrelsome and suspicious people. Its suburbs extend great distances, and the farther out you go the more isolated and alone its residents are. The protagonist of the tale joins a group of citizens taking a bus ride to heaven. When they get there, the vast majority of them elect not to stay but return to hell.

Lewis skillfully draws a picture of people who are convinced they are right and God is wrong. One person refuses to stay in heaven if someone else is there. Another refuses to stay unless she can once again take control of her husband. They refuse to shed the prejudices, fears and opinions that kept them out of heaven in the first place. They refuse to grow. The Scottish author George MacDonald acts as a tour guide for Lewis's visitor. The visitor asks, "Is there really a way out of Hell into Heaven?" MacDonald replies,

It depends on the way ye're using the words. If they leave that grey town behind it will not have been Hell. To any that leaves it, it is Purgatory. And perhaps ye had better not call this country Heaven. Not *Deep Heaven*, ye understand. . . . Ye can call it the Valley of the Shadow of Life. And yet to those who stay here it will have been heaven from the first. And ye can call those sad streets in the town yonder the Valley of the Shadow of Death: but to those who remain there they will have been Hell even from the beginning. . . . Not only this valley but all this earthly past will have been heaven to those who are saved. Not only the twilight in that town, but all their life on earth too will then be seen by the damned to have been Hell.

Lewis is not trying to describe the reality of heaven and hell. *The Great Divorce* is an extended metaphor. Lewis is not saying hell is a gray city or heaven a lovely valley. His book is rather a warning that the patterns and expectations that frame our lives here will follow us into the life to come. If we have not responded to the love of God here, why would we expect we would respond to the love of God there? Those who cling to their own peculiar visions of themselves and of reality will increasingly, as Luther put it, curve in upon themselves. The gospel intends to straighten us out through the love of God and of one another. Otherwise, we grow in narcissism and paranoia until no one or nothing exists except our own fears. As Abraham warned the rich man in Hades regarding his brothers, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Lk 16:31).

FOR MORE INFORMATION AND TO SCHEDULE AN INTERVIEW CONTACT:

Krista Carnet, broadcast publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4013 or kkcarnet@ivpress.com
 Alisse Wissman, print publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4059 or awissman@ivpress.com
 Adrianna Wright, online publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4096 or awright@ivpress.com
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BOOK EXCERPT

John E. Phelan Jr. is senior professor of theological studies at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago, Illinois. He formerly served as dean and president of the seminary. Phelan is also the author of several books, including *All God's People* and *The Church in the Postmodern World*.

At the beginning of this chapter I suggested that the warnings of judgment in the Bible suggest we live in a morally serious universe. The way we live today matters. The decisions we make today matter. Who we are today matters. You can make a case that *hell* in the Bible refers to a place of eternal isolation from God. You can make a case that in the end those who resist God are utterly destroyed. You can even make a case that God in the end will restore all things and people to himself. But God's great gift of freedom suggests that we human beings are perfectly free to choose against our own best interests. We can sink into misery, fear and loss here and, as George MacDonald suggested, have our decisions confirmed in the life to come. We can also rise in love and faith to the one whose love is eternal. We can turn in upon ourselves, or we can open like a flower in the sun of God's love.

—Taken from chapter four, "Hope for Judgment"



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Adrianna Wright, online publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4096 or awright@ivpress.com
ivpress.com/academic