

The Bahá'í Concept of Heaven and Hell; Rewards and Punishments

By Susan Gammage ¹

Souls are equal at the time of birth, but in this world they begin to differ. Some achieve the highest station, some a middle one, others are at the lowest stage of being.

There will he gaze on his fellows and his peers, and those in the ranks above him, and those below. As for what is meant by the equality of souls in the all-highest realm, it is this: the souls of the believers, at the time when they first become manifest in the world of the body, are equal, and each is sanctified and pure. In this world, however, they will begin to differ one from another, some achieving the highest station, some a middle one, others remaining at the lowest stage of being. Their equal status is at the beginning of their existence; the differentiation followeth their passing away. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 171)

It all depends on the choices we make in this world.

What Do Bahá'ís Believe about Heaven and Hell?

Heaven and hell are not physical locations, but rather conditions within our own beings:

Heaven and hell are conditions within our own beings. (Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 210, #703)

Heaven and hell are found in all the worlds of God, including this one.

But the paradise and hell of existence are found in all the worlds of God, whether in this world or in the spiritual heavenly worlds. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Baha'i World Faith, p. 323)

Love and good fellowship are the delights of heaven, whereas hostility and hatred are the torments of hell.

Think ye of love and good fellowship as the delights of heaven, think ye of hostility and hatred as the torments of hell. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 245)

Heaven

By "Heaven" is not meant this infinite phenomenal space, but "heaven" signifies the world of the divine kingdom which is the supreme station and seat of the Sun of Truth. (Tablets of 'Abdul-Bahá, Vol. 1, p. 192)

¹ Prepared by David Bowie (2023) for posting, with permission of author, at https://bahai-library.com/gammage_various_essays

Heaven is found in loving and serving God; and in going on pilgrimage.

And paradise is for such as love thee, heaven is for such as serve thee, the everlasting abode is for such as visit (thy tomb)! (Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá v2, p. 384)

To 'get to heaven' is dependent on two things.

- Faith in the Manifestation of God in His Day (in this Age it would be faith in Bahá'u'lláh)
- Good deeds (living a noble life to the best of our ability and doing unto others as we would have done to us)

But even that will always be dependent on the Mercy of God and His Bounty.

To 'get to heaven' as you say is dependent on two things -- faith in the Manifestation of God in His Day, in other words in this Age in Bahá'u'lláh; and good deeds, in other words living to the best of our ability a noble life and doing unto others as we would be done by. But we must always remember that our existence and everything we have or ever will have is dependent upon the Mercy of God and His Bounty, and therefore He can accept into His heaven, which is really nearness to Him, even the lowliest if He pleases. We always have the hope of receiving His Mercy if we reach out for it. (Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 210, #705)

Another way to get to heaven might be through generosity.

Should a wealthy man choose to bequeath, upon his death, a portion of his wealth to the poor and needy, perchance this action will bring about divine pardon and forgiveness, and result in his progress in Divine Kingdom of the All-Merciful. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, 2014 revised edition, p. 267)

Or to go on pilgrimage.

The Apostle of God -- may the blessings of God and His salutations be upon Him -- is reported to have said: "Blessed the man that hath visited 'Akká, and blessed he that hath visited the visitor of 'Akká.... Well is it with him that hath drunk from these springs, and washed in their waters, for God hath forbidden the fire of hell to touch him and his body on the Day of Resurrection. (Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, pp. 179-180)

Or to be related to someone who has recognized and embraced the Bahá'í Faith and done no harm to the Faith or to others.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of this most great Dispensation is that the kin of such as have recognized and embraced the truth of this Revelation and have,

in the glory of His name, the Sovereign Lord, quaffed the choice, sealed wine from the chalice of the love of the one true God, will, upon their death, if they are outwardly non-believers, be graciously invested with divine forgiveness and partake of the ocean of His Mercy. This bounty, however, will be vouchsafed only to such souls as have inflicted no harm upon Him Who is the Sovereign Truth nor upon His loved ones. Thus hath it been ordained by Him Who is the Lord of the Throne on High and the Ruler of this world and of the world to come. (Bahá'u'lláh, The Compilation of Compilations vol. I, p. 386, #823)

Hell:

- The worst hell is to:
- question the signs of God
- dispute idly that which God has revealed
- deny God
- carry one's self proudly before God

The most burning fire is to question the signs of God, to dispute idly that which He hath revealed, to deny Him and carry one's self proudly before Him. (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 156)

They that have disbelieved in God and rebelled against His sovereignty are the helpless victims of their corrupt inclinations and desires. These shall return to their abode in the fire of hell: wretched is the abode of the deniers! (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, CXXIX, pp. 284-285)

No matter how many good deeds we've done in the past, if at the moment of our death, we are a disbeliever, we shall surely enter the gates of hell, and no one will intercede for us.

By the righteousness of Him Who hath called thee into being and unto Whom ere long thou shalt return, if thou remainest, at the moment of death, a disbeliever in the signs of thy Lord thou shalt surely enter the gates of hell, and none of the deeds thy hands have wrought will profit thee, nor shalt thou find a patron nor anyone to plead for thee. (Selections from the Writings of the Báb, p. 19)

Rewards and Punishments:

Is there a time of reckoning (such as St. Peter meeting us at the "pearly gates")? Definitely! It is clear and evident.

It is clear and evident that all men shall, after their physical death, estimate the worth of their deeds, and realize all that their hands have wrought. I swear by the Day Star that shineth above the horizon of Divine power! (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, LXXXVI, p. 171)

They that are the followers of the one true God shall, the moment they depart out of this life, experience such joy and gladness as would be impossible to describe,

while they that live in error shall be seized with such fear and trembling, and shall be filled with such consternation, as nothing can exceed. (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 171)

In the next world, we'll be subjected to both rewards and punishments. The biggest reward will be to attain the highest state of perfection; and the biggest punishment will be trapped in a world of imperfection, concealed and ignorant of God.

The spirits of heavenly souls will find eternal life, that is, they will attain the highest and most great stations of perfection; but the spirits of the heedless souls, although they are eternal, yet they are in a world of imperfection, concealment and ignorance. This is a concise answer. Contemplate and meditate upon it, in order that thou mayest comprehend the reality of the mysteries in detail. For instance: No matter how much the mineral has an existence and life, yet in comparison to man, it is entirely non-existent and deprived of life. For where man is translated from life to death, his comparative station will be that of a mineral existence. (Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá v3, p. 550)

None of us know where we'll be spending eternity. It depends on our condition at the hour of our death.

He should forgive the sinful, and never despise his low estate, for none knoweth what his own end shall be. How often hath a sinner attained, at the hour of death, to the essence of faith, and, quaffing the immortal draught, hath taken his flight unto the Concourse on high! And how often hath a devout believer, at the hour of his soul's ascension, been so changed as to fall into the nethermost fire! (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, CXXV, p. 266)

A Personal Experience:

One of the biggest bounties of my life was being present when a prisoner passed into the next world. In this world, he'd hurt a lot of people through his descent into the drug world, and a few days prior to his death, he was released from prison, into the care of a woman he'd previously hurt. She had forgiven him and brought him into her home to die. About an hour before his passing, she called me, and knowing of this quote, I spent the last hour with him, saying prayers for the removal of his sins; so he could detach from the veils which led to his addictions; and so that he could draw closer to God. He had a very easy passing, and I truly had the sense that he had taken his flight unto the Concourse on High! What a gift, for both of us!

Rewards:

Those who have recognized God and walked in His ways, will return to Him and attain a station and power that can't be described.

As to those that have tasted of the fruit of man's earthly existence, which is the recognition of the one true God ... their life hereafter is such as We are unable to describe. The knowledge thereof is with God, alone, the Lord of all worlds. (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, CLXIV, pp. 345-346)

Thou hast, moreover, asked Me concerning the state of the soul after its separation from the body. 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. (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, LXXXII, p. 161)

If at the hour of our death, we are sanctified from the vain imaginings of the world, we'll enter the all-highest paradise and be able to talk about what we've had to endure to all the Prophets of God and His chosen ones:

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. (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, LXXXI, p. 156)

We'll understand all the things that were mysteries to us in this world; we'll witness the reality of every great soul; we'll behold the Beauty of God and find all the friends of God.

Undoubtedly, the holy souls who find a pure eye and are favored with insight will, in the kingdom of lights, be acquainted with all mysteries, and will seek the bounty of witnessing the reality of every great soul. Even they will manifestly behold the Beauty of God in that world. Likewise will they find all the friends of God, both those of the former and recent times, present in the heavenly assemblage. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í World Faith, p. 367)

Our biggest rewards are peace, spiritual gifts, gaining the desires of our hearts, and meeting God.

The rewards of the other world are peace, the spiritual graces, the various spiritual gifts in the Kingdom of God, the gaining of the desires of the heart and the soul, and the meeting of God in the world of eternity. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í World Faith, p. 325)

To be wealthy in the next world is to be near to God.

The wealth of the next world consisteth in nearness to God. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, 2014 revised edition, p. 266)

The rewards in the next world include perfections and peace.

Likewise the rewards of the other world are the eternal life which is clearly mentioned in all the Holy Books, the divine perfections, the eternal bounties, and everlasting felicity. The rewards of the other world are the perfections and the peace obtained in the spiritual worlds after leaving this world; whilst the rewards of this life are the real luminous perfections which are realized in this world, and which are the cause of eternal life, for they are the very progress of existence. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í World Faith, pp. 324-325)

Even and individual who has never heard of the Bahá'í Faith but has led a good life will reap their reward.

Those who have never had any opportunity of hearing of the Faith but who lived good lives will no doubt be treated with the greatest love and mercy in the next world and reap their full reward. (Shoghi Effendi, Directives from the Guardian, p. 40)

Punishments:

The biggest punishments include being deprived of God's blessings and bounties.

In the same way the punishments of the other world, that is to say, the torments of the other world, consist in being deprived of the special divine blessings and the absolute bounties, and falling into the lowest degrees of existence. He who is deprived of these divine favors, although he continues after death, is considered as dead by the people of truth. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í World Faith, p. 325)

Separation from the things we've acquired in this world is a punishment in and of itself; producing remorse and making it hard to believe in the mercy of God.

You will find many of the wealthy exposed to dangers and troubled by difficulties, and in their last moments upon the bed of death there remains the regret that they must be separated from that to which their hearts are so attached. They come into this world naked, and they must go from it naked. All they possess they must leave behind and pass away solitary, alone. Often at the time of death their souls are filled with remorse; and worst of all, their hope in the mercy of God is less than ours. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 33)

Ensuring a Better Life in the Next World

If we want to ensure a better life in the next world, we can say the Tablet of Ahmad.

Learn well this Tablet, O Ahmad. Chant it during thy days and withhold not thyself therefrom. For verily, God hath ordained for the one who chants it, the reward of a hundred martyrs and a service in both worlds. These favours have We bestowed upon thee as a bounty on Our part and a mercy from Our presence, that thou mayest be of those who are grateful. (Bahá'u'lláh, Tablet of Ahmad, Bahá'í Prayers, p. 211)

We could make effort and strive to do the right thing.

The questioner then said, how could this state of development be acquired? 'Abdu'l-Bahá replied, by unceasing effort, striving to do right, and to attain spiritual qualities. (Abdu'l-Bahá in London, p. 74)

We could choose humility and sacrifice in the way of God.

If thou art seeking everlasting glory, choose humility in the path of the True One. If thou art aspiring to eternal life, sacrifice thy soul in the way of God. (Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá v1, p. 214)