

Making Our Way



A McMAHON / CHEYNE PODCAST

#90 • Season 3 • Episode 29

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“Hell No!”

Our Hosts

Janet Cheyne McMahon is a lover of family, dogs, nature, travel, books, and music. Born south of the Mason-Dixon line, she left after 9 months for parts north, landing eventually in Michigan, which will always be “where I’m from.”

Love of learning led Jan to a Bachelor of Arts (History, Political Science) at the University of Michigan-Dearborn (Go Blue), and a Master of Arts (Library and Information Science) at the University of South Florida. Amid all that, studied for a time with Rob at Colorado State University, a pivotal time in their lives.

Worked at the U of M-Dearborn Library, and then The Salvation Army Florida Divisional Headquarters, with the greatest reward being in serving as the Divisional Librarian. A librarian is who Jan is “in my soul.”

Jan and Rob have made our home in Florida since 1983, and live now in retirement with their dog, Skye, who makes it all the best adventure. They travel as much as possible, spending time in nature and in diverse places on this amazing planet. It has all been, and continues to be a fascinating journey, with hope of making a difference, in small ways, by being brave enough to speak and act on behalf of others.

Rob McMahon is a native Michigander, born in Saginaw and raised in the suburbs of Detroit. Rob attended Michigan State University, graduating in 1978 with a Bachelor of Science degree. He did graduate studies at the University of Michigan and the University of South Florida. Rob is retired, having spent 36 years in public education teaching both high school chemistry and biology and middle school science. He worked as a total quality management trainer for the Pinellas County School District and served four years as the president of the Pinellas Classroom Teachers Association. Rob cofounded a non-profit total quality management training center, The Learning Co-op, for Teacher Unions interested in applying the W. Edwards Deming continuous improvement principles to their day-to-day operations. He worked with teacher unions in Colorado, Maryland, New Mexico, North Dakota, Texas and Michigan. He also worked in a similar capacity with Jim Shipley & Associates. In retirement Rob has written a series of science related children’s books, and enjoys traveling with his wife, Jan, and their Black Labrador Retriever, Skye.

Deanna Cheyne, born in St. John’s, Newfoundland, earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Vocal Performance from the University of Toronto (1996), studying with such luminaries as Elmer Eisler, Doreen Rao, Greta Kraus, Lois Marshall, and Rosemarie Landry.

Dee taught music at Mississauga Christian Academy, served as music director for Meadowvale Bible Baptist Church (Mississauga, Ontario), served as Assistant Divisional Music Director for The Salvation Army in Florida, is a former member of Tampa’s Master Chorale, and, for the past 18 years, has been a public school teacher.

Dee has visit 36 of the 50 U.S. states, and 12 countries. Her favorite destinations include France, Prague, New Orleans, National Parks, & Hawaii.

Dee & Jim live in Florida with Brigus (Golden Retriever) and Pip (Teacup Yorkie).

James Cheyne, born in Galesburg, Illinois, earned a Bachelor of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from Michigan State University (1978); and a Master of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from the University of Illinois Urbana/Champaign (1981), studying with David Liptak, Salvatore Martirano, and Ben Johnston.

Jim has served as music director for The Salvation Army in Central Illinois & Eastern Iowa, Orlando Area Command, and the Florida Division, served as a pastor with The Salvation Army, and was a public school teacher for 17 years.

In travel so far, Jim has visited 50 states and 27 countries. His favorite travel destinations include National Parks, New Orleans, Newfoundland, Argentina, Prague, & France.

Jim continues to write music and support Dee’s musical endeavors, and cooks whenever absolutely necessary. Jim & Dee live in Florida with their dogs Brigus & Pip.



L-R: Brigus, Jim, Deanna, Skye, Jan, Rob.
Inset: Pip

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"Hell No!"

#90 - Season 3; Episode 29

4/1/2026

Host: Rob

| Rob discusses the orthodox doctrine of hell, and explores the scriptural basis for what existence after death might be.

Note: All quotations of Scripture use the New Revised Standard Version (1989).

[Music]

ROB: Our dog Skye, who has been part of this podcast from the beginning, is a smart dog. As a puppy, she was quick to learn the behaviors we sought to teach her, and we were quick to learn the behaviors she expected from us. We used positive reinforcement to teach her to sit, stay, place. The basics. Skye received a reward for the correct behavior. Similarly, she taught us to utilize the edges of our bed so she could spread out in the middle, and to make sure our dirty socks were securely stored away, or she would surely bring them to us for a game of keep-away. The positive reinforcement she provides is the unconditional love and devotion she gives us.

Positive reinforcement can be a powerful influence. In the past, humans have instituted rewards to encourage behavior, but they also instituted punishments to discourage certain behavior. Nowhere is this more diabolically applied than in the Christian religion. The idea of heaven as a reward and hell as a punishment have caused, in my opinion, much misunderstanding among truth seeking people. Is there really a place of eternal fire and torment awaiting the non-Christian? I say, "Hell No!"

[Music]

I don't believe in hell. I do believe in a certain concept of hell, but not in the traditional orthodox depiction of it. I just can't bring myself to believe in a place of eternal torment and damnation, burning with fire and brimstone. For me, it defies all reason and logic, and is inconsistent with Scripture and the God and Savior I have come to know during my faith journey.

Reason is a God-given human quality that we are frequently asked to leave at the door of the church, but I think it provides a powerful and compelling argument against the existence of an eternal hell. So allow me to start there. I mean, come on, think about it. How vindictive does God have to be to create or allow the existence of a place that can forever separate him from his creatures while they're kept in a state of perpetual pain and suffering? What kind of God would allow such a thing? And who would choose to serve such a God?

I'm convinced that the hell of eternal fire and torment was invented as a way for organized religious leaders to control their congregants, or perhaps to house their critics. I have a

great aunt whose daughter was brutally murdered. She wrote a book about her experience and the conscious decision she made through the grace of God to forgive her daughter's killer. Now, I ask you, if a human being of a, quote "depraved nature" unquote, can forgive the perpetrator of such an unspeakable crime, am I to believe that a holy God, the Savior of all mankind, cannot? Or will not?

It's easy for us to condemn others to hell, those with whom we have no relationship or knowledge. The everlasting punishment of the faceless wicked can be justified by some. However, it's not so easy to damn to eternal torment those whom we know and love.

What does the eulogist say of the unsaved? I have witnessed pastor and priest alike go through extraordinary contortions to rescue the unbelieving dead from the flames of eternal fire. For the sake of the grieving family, they cannot bring themselves to pronounce such a horrible end. Instead, there is always the chance that, at death's door, a decision for Christ was made, that salvation came in the nick of time and rescued the departed from eternal doom. You see, when it comes right down to it, even a scriptural literalist struggles to believe that a life can end, and a new and eternal one can begin in such a horrific place as the orthodox hell. When it's someone they know, it defies even their inflexible sensibilities.

Now imagine God, who knows the number of the hairs on our head, a God for whom the tiniest sparrow cannot fall to the ground unnoticed, a God who is love and "operates all things according to the counsel of his will," [Ephesians 1:11] being "able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think" [Ephesians 3:20] - okay, I may have just slipped into a scriptural argument here, but if this represents even remotely your concept of God, if you believe that he has an intimate knowledge and loving concern for all of his creatures, then can you imagine him sentencing any one of them to an eternity in hell?

If we have a free will, is it fathomable that God would torture us eternally for a poor choice made during this fleeting life? And if our choices are foreordained, by what standard of justice could he possibly convict and punish us endlessly for doing what we were predestined to do?

The punishment of everlasting torment does not reasonably fit any conceivable crime. And taking away the eternal aspect of the punishment doesn't help. I cannot conceive of my Creator, who gives life and breath to all, sustaining that life for any length of time in a state of constant agony and distress.

And think about the billions of people on earth who have no knowledge of the Christian Savior and His salvation. What about the children raised in Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism, just to name a few, oblivious to the precepts of Christianity, and therefore condemned to eternal hellfire for no other reason than their birthplace? Billions packed into hell, men and women and children who are cut off from any opportunity to hear, consider, or respond to the gospel of Christ, because of history, geography, or cruel destiny. I'm not able to render such a verdict on the vast majority of humanity. How then can God?

Now I'm aware of the supposed arguments against the reliability of human reason put forth by what I call the Christian Pharisees. God's thoughts are not our thoughts, and his ways are unlike our ways. Okay, but to that I reply with the words of the great biblical scholar, Ebenezer Scrooge, "Bah! Humbug!" God has given us minds to use, the ability to think, to gather and weigh evidence and construct meaning from our world. Just because some have

not discovered how to do that for themselves, is no cause for the rest of us to abandon reason.

Reason and logic provide powerful and compelling arguments against the hell of orthodox Christianity, perhaps more so than any scriptural arguments. But if you find reason unconvincing, let's consider the scriptural evidence.

If through the centuries heaven has become the great carrot of Christianity, then hell has become the corresponding stick. The Pharisees of every age have been aware of the powerful influence of threats of punishment. Where reward is not incentive enough to exert control, fear of retribution can work wonders. To this end, these church leaders have manipulated the truth in exchange for a set of positive and negative reinforcements, to which God's people have been so conditioned that to question any one of them is considered heresy. I don't believe that in the short time we have here we can possibly undo the damage of centuries of misrepresentation, but I believe that four scriptural references can provide some alternatives to the orthodox concept of hell for us to consider.

The word hell carries with it lots of baggage, so much so that it is nearly impossible for us to consider any different interpretation without discarding the word altogether. Close your eyes. Now think of the word hell. What are the first three words or phrases that pop into your mind? If your list includes fire, brimstone, burning, annihilation, everlasting punishment, eternal torment, well, then you see the problem. There are just too many well-established preconceptions for us to even consider a different meaning.

So for the time being, let's set the word hell aside, and replace it with the three words that are translated "hell" in the English versions of the Bible. They are the Hebrew word *Sheol*, its Greek equivalent *Hades*, and the word *Gehenna*, which turns out to be a Greek transliteration of the name of a place, the Vale or Valley of Hinnom. Psalm 16:10, attributed to King David, says this,

"For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the pit,"
(literally, "to see corruption")

The word *Sheol* means *unseen*, and is an apt description of the Hebrew concept of what happens to the souls of the dead. They are unseen. When God created humans, he made a body from the earth, the dust of the ground, breathed his spirit into it, the breath of life, and the man became a living soul. That's Genesis 2:7. It's the combination of a physical body and an energizing spirit that makes us living, sentient beings, souls. At death, the body returns to the dust from which it came, the spirit returns to God who gave it, and the soul, well, the soul vanishes. It's unseen.

Consider this analogy. When you turn on an incandescent light, the electricity, representing the spirit, flows through the filament of the bulb, representing the body, which produces light, representing the soul. When you turn off the electricity, what happens to the light? Where does it go? It goes to Sheol. It is unseen. By the way, if you're too young to know what an incandescent light bulb is, the analogy works with LED bulbs as well. Just replace filament with semiconductor chips. Okay? So, from an Old Testament perspective, Sheol is the ultimate fate of the souls of the dead, all the dead, the good and bad alike. The psalmist David intimates this in the reference presented above. He was confident that God would not abandon or leave his soul in Sheol. Can you imagine King David and the

Christians' fiery hell? His soul, like all the souls of the dead, was unseen.

Whether Sheol is an actual place or a state of non-existence is uncertain, and perhaps inconsequential. If the Hebrew concept of life and death are accurate, an actual place is not necessary. It seems unlikely that the soul, or seat of consciousness and sensation, would continue to function once the spirit is removed from the body in death. This idea of death as an unconscious existence is further suggested by the use of the term *sleep* for death throughout the Bible. Just as there is no consciousness in sleep, so it is with all sensation and consciousness at death. It simply vanishes into the unseen, *Sheol*.

As it turns out, David's Psalm was also a prophecy concerning the Messiah. In his first sermon, Peter quotes Psalm 16:10, replacing the Hebrew word *Sheol* with the Greek word *Hades*.

"For seeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying, 'He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption.'"

That's Acts 2.31.

This establishes *Hades* as the New Testament equivalent of *Sheol*. The meaning is the same. *Hades* represents the unseen state of the souls of those who die, and according to Peter, this apparently included the soul of Christ. When Jesus died, he committed his spirit to God, his body was laid in a tomb, and his soul went to the unseen. But unlike David, whose tomb Peter reminded his listeners is with us to this day, Jesus could not be held by death. His spirit and body were reunited in resurrection, and his soul did not remain in *Hades*.

"Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died," (literally fallen asleep). [I Corinthians 15:20]

And because of this fact, we share David's confidence that our souls will not be abandoned in the unseen. No fire and brimstone to contend with, no continual torment to endure, just unencumbered sleep until the resurrection day.

The third word translated hell is *Gehenna*. It is a transliteration, Greek letters applied to a Hebrew word. In Mark 9:47 & 48, Jesus says this,

"And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into Gehenna, where the worm never dies and the fire is never quenched."* [the text says, "hell," with "Gehenna" as an alternate reading.]

Gehenna is an actual place called the Valley of Hinnom. At the time of Christ, this valley was Jerusalem's landfill, the major dumping ground where the trash and waste from the city was hauled and burned. Thus the description, "where the worm never dies and the fire is never quenched." This continually smouldering maggot-infested garbage dump was a physical place. *Gehenna* was the ignominious resting place for the bodies of executed criminals and the wretched poor. It was a place to be abhorred and avoided at all costs. Jesus' listeners understood the meaning and significance of his admonition that it's better to lose a hand, a foot, or an eye, than have the whole body cast into *Gehenna*. Though they would shudder at the thought, no one in Jesus' day would mistake this as an eternal afterlife experience.

So those are the three words translated *hell* in the Bible. Two are words whose meaning is simply the unseen. The third was an actual place outside the walls of Jerusalem that would be known to the people of Christ's day. Taken with the concept of death as a kind of sleep, the Bible reveals the possibility of a benign hell, an unseen resting place of the dead, instead of an endless fiery torment.

There's a fourth word translated hell: *Tartarus*. It occurs only once [2 Peter 2:4] and refers to a place of judgment for sinning angels or messengers and has no connection to us.

The last of the references is the closest thing I have found in the Scripture to support the orthodox view of a hell.

"Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire, and anyone whose name was not found in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire."

That's Revelation 20:14&15. But notice first of all that the lake of fire is never called hell. Indeed, in the passage above, Death and Hades (hell) are cast into the lake of fire, so they cannot be one and the same.

So what is this lake that burns with fire and sulfur in John's vision? The lake of fire is simply and clearly defined as the second death. The only difference between this death and the first is that those who end up in the lake of fire have already been dead. Like the first death, it's the dissolution of the body, in this case, a resurrected body, and the spirit. Just as in the first death, there is no indication in the second death that any human being is kept in a state of conscious suffering for any period of time. Those that are cast into the lake of fire return to death and sleep once more while they await their ultimate fate.

Is there any possibility of that fate being a positive one? In light of the statement that Death itself is thrown into the lake of fire, and Paul's claim that the last enemy to be destroyed is death, I think there is.

But that's another topic for another time.

[Music]