

What Heaven Is

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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INTRODUCTION

We live in a time when credit cards allow us to own what we can't afford, go where we wouldn't be able to go, and do what would otherwise be impossible for us. Then we begin paying--hopefully. Sometimes people allow their indebtedness to steadily increase until they can't meet all their obligations, and serious problems result. The credit problem is symptomatic of an attitude that says, "I want what I want when I want it!" The mindset of our age is against postponing anything. We prefer instant gratification, gladly sacrificing the future on the altar of the immediate.

Unfortunately the church has fallen prey to such materialistic indulgence. Rather than setting their affections on things above (Col. 3:1), many Christians are attached to the earth. Rather than laying up their treasure in heaven, they have dedicated themselves to accumulating treasure here. Certain television and radio ministries, preaching a prosperity gospel, promise people that Jesus wants them healthy, wealthy, and successful. Such teaching is extremely popular because it caters to people's desire to have everything in this life. Because the church doesn't have heaven on its mind, it tends to be indulgent, self-centered, and weak. Its present comfort consumes its thoughts, and it entertains only passing thoughts of heaven.

A. The Preciousness of Heaven

In reality, everything that is precious to us as Christians is in heaven.

1. Our Father

In Matthew 6:9 Jesus says, "Pray, then, in this way: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name." Our Father, who is the source of everything, is in heaven.

2. Our Savior

Hebrews 9:24 says, "Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us." Our Savior is also in heaven.

3. Our brothers and sisters in Christ

Hebrews 12:23 says, "To the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect." Our brothers and sisters in the faith are there. Every Old and New Testament believer who has died is in heaven.

4. Our names

In Luke 10:20 Christ tells His disciples, who were casting out demons, "Do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven." By saying that our names are written in heaven, Christ assures us that we have a title deed to property there.

5. Our inheritance

First Peter 1:3-4 says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you." Our eternal inheritance--all the riches of God's glory and grace--is there.

6. Our citizenship

In Philippians 3:20 Paul observes that "our citizenship is in heaven." We are citizens; we belong there.

7. Our eternal reward

In Matthew 5:12 Jesus says we we're to consider ourselves blessed when others persecute us because our reward is in heaven.

8. Our Master

In Ephesians 6:9 Paul reminds us that our Master is in heaven.

9. Our treasure

In Matthew 6:19-21 Jesus says that the only treasure we will possess throughout eternity is there. We can summarize by saying that heaven is our home. Christians are strangers, pilgrims, and aliens in this world.

B. The Priority of heaven

1. Explained

Everything we love, everything we value, everything eternal is in heaven. Nevertheless the church in this century has tended to be self-indulgent, proof that many Christians have lost their heavenly perspective. Too many don't want to go to heaven until they've enjoyed all that the world can deliver. Only when all earthly pursuits are exhausted, or when age and sickness hamper their enjoyment, are they ready for heaven. It is as if they pray, "Please God, don't take to heaven yet; I haven't been to Hawaii!" Or, "I haven't gotten my new car or house." What a jaded perspective!

First John 2 says, "If any one loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.... The world is passing away" (vv. 15, 17). Many people who claim to love Christ love the world so much that they can't possibly be citizens of heaven. Like the old spiritual says, everybody talking about heaven ain't going there. But it is also true that everyone going there isn't talking about it. The hope of heaven should fill us with a joy of anticipation that loosens us from this transitory world. It's easy to become so attached to the world that we spend our energy consuming things that will perish rather than accumulating treasure in heaven. Some people think heaven is an imaginary place, the dream of little children. Others believe it is a state of mind, a projection of all that is good in humanity, or the immortality of truth and beauty. But the Bible says heaven is a place, the eventual dwelling of all who love God. We will live there forever in complete perfection and glory.

2. Exemplified

a) Paul's situation When Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, he was facing overwhelming persecution. In 4:8-10 he says, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body." In verses 16-17 he says, "We do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison." Paul is saying that whatever we endure in this life can't be compared with the glory it's producing in the life to come. When the mother of James and John asked Christ if He would allow her sons to sit on His left and right in the Kingdom, Christ said that decision was the Father's, but implied that the Father would give it to the one who suffered most here for His name (Matt. 20:21-23). Whatever we endure here will be compensated for in eternity. b) Paul's shell Paul continues, "We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal. For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (2 Cor. 4:18[en]5:1). (1) The decay of the earthly body Our earthly tent is being torn down. I remember reading that when someone asked John Quincy Adams how he was doing, Adams replied something to the effect of, "John Quincy Adams is well, sir, very well. The house in which he has been living is dilapidated and old, and he has received word from its maker that he must vacate soon. But John Quincy Adams is well, sir, very well." Indeed our earthly tent is being torn down, but when it's gone, we'll have a building from God, eternal in the heavens. Second Corinthians 5:2 says of our earthly bodies, "Indeed in this house we groan." We groan because of

the infirmities of the flesh and the sin that permeates it. We groan because we can't be what we long to be. We're debilitated in these bodies, so we groan with the rest of creation, waiting "eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God" (Rom. 8:19). We long to be clothed with a heavenly body.(2) The anticipation of an eternal bodyIn 2 Corinthians 5:2-4 Paul continues, "We groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven; inasmuch as we, having put it on, shall not be found naked. For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed, but to be clothed, in order that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life." Although in this body we groan because we are burdened by sin, sickness, sorrow, and death, we don't want to be unclothed. We want both our spirits and our bodies to enter the presence of God. Paul yearned for heaven and his eternal body.Verse 5 says, "He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to the Spirit as a pledge." The Greek word translated "pledge" is arrab[ma]on, the same word Paul uses in Ephesians 1:14 to refer to the Holy Spirit. In modern Greek a form of arrab[ma]on refers to an engagement ring. In New Testament times it referred to a down payment or first installment--earnest money. So, the Holy Spirit is the pledge of the new body we will have in the glories of heaven.c) Paul's strategyIn verses 6-8 Paul mentions the practical results of his teaching in the previous verses: "Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord--for we walk by faith, not by sight--we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord." Do you find it difficult to say honestly that those verses express the deepest desires of your heart? There is a tendency to hold tightly to this world because it's all we know. We experience meaningful relationships here, so we become captive to this life. But notice that Paul says, "At home with the Lord." We are at home only when we're with the Lord--that's where we belong.As we examine what the Bible teaches about heaven, we should long to be clothed with our heavenly form. We should look forward to being absent from the body and present with the Lord. We should become more preoccupied with the glories of eternity rather than the afflictions of today. We need to spend our energy accumulating heavenly treasures rather than amassing treasures here that are ultimately meaningless. After a rich person died, someone asked one of his friends how much he left. The friend answered, "All of it." And that's exactly what each of us will leave.

LESSON

I. WHAT HEAVEN IS

The Bible refers to heaven about 550 times. The Hebrew word translated "heaven" (shamayim) is plural and literally means "the heights." The Greek word translated "heaven" is ouranos, which inspired the name of the planet Uranus. It refers to that which is raised up or lofty.

A. A Place

Both those words are used to refer to three different places. In 2 Corinthians 12:2 Paul says, "Such a man [probably a reference to himself] was caught up to the third heaven" (emphasis added). That clearly demonstrates there are three heavens.

1. The atmospheric heaven

Sometimes when the Bible speaks of heaven, it is referring to the region usually called the troposphere--the atmosphere around the earth. It's the air we breathe. For example, Isaiah 55:9 says, "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven" Here the word "heaven" refers to the atmosphere, which is where the hydrological cycle occurs. Psalm 147:8 says that God "covers the heavens with clouds." That is the first heaven.

2. The planetary heaven

The second heaven is where the stars, moons, and planets are. Scripture also mentions this heaven. For example, Genesis 1 says, "God said, Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens.... God made the two great lights, the greater light to govern the day, and the lesser light to govern the night; He made the stars also. And God placed them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the

earth" (vv. 14,16-17). That's the second heaven.

3. The divine heaven

The third heaven is the place where God dwells with His holy angels and those saints who have died.

How Can an Omnipresent God Live in Heaven?

In 1 Kings 8:27 Solomon prays, "Heaven and the highest heaven [lit. "heaven of heavens"] cannot contain Thee, how much less this house which I have built!" There is a sense in which the heaven of heavens can't contain God, yet in another sense it is His dwelling place. A simple illustration may help clarify how both can be true: I live in a house, but that house can't contain me. It doesn't contain me bodily at all times, and it certainly can't contain the effect of my life--my influence. Although that is an imperfect illustration, it expresses how God can dwell in heaven, but at the same time not be limited or contained to it.

a) In the Old Testament Isaiah 57:15 says, "Thus says the high and exalted One who lives forever, whose name is Holy, I dwell on a high and holy place." God has a real dwelling place. Isaiah 63:15 identifies that place: "Look down from heaven, and see from Thy holy and glorious habitation." Psalm 33:13-14 says, "The Lord looks from heaven; He sees all the sons of men; from His dwelling place He looks out." So there is a place where God dwells, and that place is called heaven. It's the heaven of heavens, the third heaven. Psalm 102:19 says, "He looked down from His holy height; from heaven the Lord gazed upon the earth." b) In the New Testament (1) Revelation Revelation 3:12 says, "He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore; and I will write upon him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God." John describes the city as descending out of heaven at God's command. (2) Matthew Christ repeatedly stressed that the Father is in heaven. In Matthew 5:16 He says, "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." In verse 34 He says, "Make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God." Verse 45 says, "That you may be the sons of your Father who is in heaven." Matthew 6:1 says, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven." In verse 9 Christ says, "Pray, then, in this way: Our Father who art in heaven." Matthew 7:11 says, "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!" Verse 21 says, "Not every one who says to Me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven." Matthew 10:32-33 says, "Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven." Matthew 12:50 says, "Whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother." In Matthew 16:17 Jesus said to Peter, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven." Matthew 18:10 says, "Do not despise one of these little ones [believers], for I say unto you, that their angels in heaven continually behold the face of My Father who is in heaven." Verse 14 says, "It is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish." Verse 19 says, "If two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven." In verse 35 Christ says, "So shall My heavenly Father also do to you." (3) John In John 6 Jesus says, "The bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, and gives life to the world" (v. 33). Again Jesus links God and heaven. In verse 38 Christ says, "I have come down from heaven." In verses 41-42 He says, "I am the bread that came down out of heaven.... I have come down out of heaven." In verses 50-51 He says, "This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down out of heaven." Verse 58 says, "This is the bread which came down out of

heaven."Heaven is not a figment of imagination, a feeling, or an emotion-- it's a place, God's place.

A Key to Interpreting the New Testament

Heaven is so much God's place that it became a synonym for God Himself. That usage is common in the New Testament. In Matthew 23:22 Jesus says, "He who swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it." Heaven there is synonymous with God. You can refer to either heaven or God and mean both. In Luke 15:7 Christ says that "there will be...joy in heaven over one sinner who repents." The following parables, including that of the prodigal son, illustrate that that refers to joy in heart of God. In fact, the prodigal son, rehearsing what he would say to his Father, said, "I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven" (Luke 15:18). That meant the same thing as sinning against God.

When the writers of Scripture speak of the Kingdom of Heaven, they are actually referring to the Kingdom of God. Particularly during the Intertestamental Period, the 400 years between the events of the Old Testament and the New, the Jewish people developed a fear of using God's name. They didn't like using the covenant name of God (Yahweh or Jehovah), because they thought it was too holy to pass through their lips. So they began substituting things for the name of God, and "heaven" became a common substitute. By New Testament times that practice was so ingrained that the Jewish people understood any reference to the Kingdom of Heaven as a reference to the Kingdom of God.

B. A Sphere

1. Explained

In Ephesians 1:3 the apostle Paul says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places [heavenlies] in Christ."

Notice that the verb tense indicates that the blessing occurred in the past. Ephesians 2:4-6 says, "God, being rich in mercy...even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised [past tense] us up with Him, and seated [past tense] us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus." Although we aren't yet in heaven, we are in the heavenlies. Heaven is where God lives and rules. We aren't in the place called heaven, but we are under the dominion of the King of heaven, so we are living in the heavenlies.

Christ preached that the Kingdom of Heaven or Kingdom of God was at hand. He called people to enter that Kingdom, to be saved, and to inherit eternal life. Those three expressions all point to one experience: salvation. Whenever someone believes in Christ, he enters the Kingdom of God--he comes under God's rule, not in heaven but in the heavenlies. Although we don't yet live in heaven, we do live in the heavenlies and should therefore be preoccupied with heavenly things. Our new life in Christ is in the heavenlies--it is under the rule and dominion of God.

2. Examined

Heaven will be a new community of holiness and fellowship with God. It will be a place of joy, peace, love, and fulfillment. But we experience that partially even now. The Holy Spirit is producing in us the fruit of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23). Those traits characterize heaven. That's what Fanny Crosby meant by "a foretaste of glory divine" in her hymn "Blessed Assurance." We are tasting now what we will enjoy in heaven. We have the life of God in us and the rule of God over us. We know joy, peace, love, goodness, and blessing. We have become part of a new family, a new kind of community. We have left the kingdom of darkness for the kingdom of light. We are no longer under the dominion of Satan but the dominion of God in Christ. Second Corinthians 5:17 says, "If any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come." We are new creations.

We are members of a new family. Rather than remaining the children of Satan, we have become the children of God. Galatians 4:26 says that Jerusalem is our mother, referring not to the earthly

Jerusalem, but to the Jerusalem where God rules. We have a new citizenship (Phil. 3:20), new affections (Col. 3:1), and a new storehouse where we are to store our treasures (Matt. 6:19-20).

CONCLUSION

So heaven is an actual place, but it is also a sphere in this world where God rules. The best of our spiritual experiences here is only a taste of heaven. Our highest spiritual heights, profoundest depths, and greatest spiritual blessings will be normal in heaven. As we live now in the heavenlies, we are merely tasting the glories of the life to come. To us heaven is now a sphere where we live under God's rule and His Spirit's blessing. Someday it will also be a real place where we will walk in our glorified bodies. In John 17 Christ prays, "Father, I desire that they also, whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am, in order that they may behold My glory" (v. 24). In John 14:1 Christ says to His disciples, "Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also." Jesus is preparing a place where we will live in a glorified, physical form similar to that of the resurrected body of Christ. He walked, ate, and sang, but He also ascended through space into the third heaven.

We are longing for "the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11:10). In ancient times a city was a place of safety and refuge. The nomadic people of those times were especially vulnerable to robbers, thieves, and the elements. Imagine after many weeks or even months of such wandering how refreshing it was to enter the protection of a walled city. Every Christian needs to see himself as a pilgrim, wandering through this world, looking for "the city...whose architect and builder is God"--a real place where we will live with Christ. We will be with Him, just as the disciples were with Him after His resurrection. Like Thomas, we will touch Him. We will sit with Him and sing with Him. The joy we have of walking with Christ and knowing that the Spirit lives within us is the pledge that someday we will live in heaven.

There Is No Purgatory

If you are a Christian, the moment you leave this life you go to heaven. The Bible doesn't teach what the medieval theologians referred to as limbus patrum or limbo. There is no purgatory. Paul said he preferred "to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:8). He said he desired "to depart and be with Christ" (Phil. 1:23).

When we consider that Christ prayed that all who know Him would spend eternity with Him (John 17:24), our hearts should overflow with gratitude. We need to have the heart of Paul--yearning to be clothed with our heavenly form and to exchange this transient world for eternal joy.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What things make heaven precious to us?
2. Explain 2 Corinthians 4:17.
3. Why does Paul say, "In this house we groan"?
4. What does arrab[ma]on mean? What insight does its meaning give to 2 Corinthians 5:5?
5. How often does the Bible refer to heaven? What are the Greek and Hebrew words translated "heaven," and what do they mean?
6. What passage clearly illustrates that there are three heavens? Explain.
7. What are the three heavens the Bible refers to?
8. Explain how an omnipresent God can live in heaven.
9. List some passages in the gospels that state God is in heaven.

10. Why did the New Testament writers occasionally substitute "heaven" for God's name? How does that practice affect the interpretation of the phrase "Kingdom of Heaven"?
11. What do entering the Kingdom, being saved, and inheriting eternal life have in common?
12. Whenever someone _____ in _____, he enters the Kingdom of God. Explain.
13. Heaven is an actual _____, but it is also a _____ in this world where God rules.
14. Explain the imagery and significance of Hebrews 11:10.
15. What passages make it clear that there is no purgatory?

Pondering the Principles

1. Paul understood that our earthly bodies are decaying. Nevertheless that awareness didn't cause him to neglect his body--he recognized that it was the temple of God (1 Cor. 6:19). Judging from some of his metaphors (e.g. 1 Cor. 9:24-27) he was apparently an interested spectator of legitimate sports. There are two prevalent extremes concerning how to treat our bodies. Some neglect them under the guise of spirituality and thereby fail to be good stewards of what God has given them. Others tend to spend much of their free time, energy, and money caring for their bodies, while practically ignoring any inner development. Are you guilty of either extreme? Determine today to be a good steward of the body God has given you but concentrate on being the kind of person you ought to be.
2. Has your desire for heaven weakened? Is heaven and the presence of God less of a motivation to you than it used to be? Read 2 Corinthians 4:7--5:10. Then meditate on Paul's attitudes about heaven and what the passage reveals as the causes of those attitudes. Ask God to enable you to have a biblical perspective about heaven.

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