

Where Heaven Is and What It Is Like

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

Code: 90-13

INTRODUCTION

In Romans 12:12 Paul tells the Roman believers that they should be "rejoicing in hope." He was referring to the hope of heaven, which ought to fill us with joy. In contrast, the preacher of Ecclesiastes said, "The day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth" (7:1). He was being cynical because life was meaningless to him, but as Christians we can agree with what he said because we have the hope of heaven. Paul said, "To me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21). The prospect of heaven made him joyful even in the face of death.

A. The Inhabitants of Heaven

1. God

Heaven is the dwelling of God. Although He is present everywhere at all times, heaven is uniquely His home. Everything that is precious to us is there: our Father, Savior, fellow believers, name, inheritance, reward, treasure, and citizenship. Heaven is our home.

2. Holy angels

Isaiah 6 pictures the Lord exalted on His heavenly throne, surrounded by holy angels (vv. 1-2). Matthew 22:30 and Luke 15:10 also state that the holy angels dwell in heaven.

3. Saints

Heaven is where saints who have died now dwell and where believers who are alive will be someday. Although we are not in heaven, we live in the heavenlies--that is, we have a foretaste of heaven because the Holy Spirit lives within us and works through us. In Christ, God has given us something of heaven's joy, love, power, and blessedness through the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is producing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control in every believer (Gal. 5:22-23), but those traits will not come to fruition until heaven. So the Spirit is the down payment of future blessings. The Christian life is like the hors d'oeuvres; the main course will be served in heaven. Believers already enjoy heavenly blessings--but someday they will actually live there.

Both Old and New Testament believers who have died are in heaven, waiting until the Second Coming when they will receive their glorified bodies. All those who in faith accepted God's way of salvation--whether in Old or New Testament times--are now in the presence of God.

B. The Intermediary State of Old Testament Saints

1. The refutation

After many years of study, I believe that the moment any believer died, he went immediately to heaven. Some Medieval theologians taught that when an Old Testament saint died he entered what was later called limbus patrum--"the limbo of the fathers." According to that teaching, he entered a place where he had to wait until Christ died, when he could finally enter heaven. But the Bible nowhere verifies such an intermediary state. On the contrary, the evidence indicates that when a believer died, he entered the presence of God.

2. The evidence

a) In the psalms(1) Psalm 16 Here we find the psalmist hopeful even as he faced death: "Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Sheol; neither wilt Thou allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay. Thou wilt make known to me the path of life; in Thy presence is fullness of joy; in Thy right hand there are

pleasures forever" (vv. 10-11). The psalmist anticipated that when he left this world, he would enter the presence of God, finding pleasure and fullness of joy.(2) Psalm 23Psalm 23 says, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me. Thou dost prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; Thou hast anointed my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." In the last verse the writer assumed that once his life was over, he would dwell in the house of the Lord, which can refer only to heaven. The hope of the psalmist was exactly the same as Paul's: "to be absent from the body and at home with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:8).b) In Matthew 17When Christ was transfigured, Moses and Elijah appeared with Him (v. 3). Although Christ's death and resurrection hadn't yet occurred, Moses and Elijah were obviously safe in God's presence and were summoned to that wonderful occasion.c) In Luke 16We read that when the beggar Lazurus died, he "was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom" (v. 22). I believe that the place of blessedness where Abraham and Lazurus were seen was the presence of God. The Greek word translated "bosom" literally means "chest." The imagery is of an eastern banquet. Banquets were occasions for feasting, music, and conversation. They often lasted for days. In fact, a wedding could last seven days! The guests usually stayed at the host's home and frequently reclined at the table. They leaned on their elbows and reclined with their heads together, so that to someone across the table it could appear that one person's head was resting on the other's chest. Apparently that was the positioning of John and Christ at the Last Supper (John 13:23). They positioned themselves that way so they could converse while they ate with the free hand.So being in Abraham's bosom meant reclining at a banquet table in a celebration of joy. In addition, Abraham is the most honored man in Jewish history. Being seated next to him meant you were seated next to the guest of honor. Lazurus, an ordinary beggar, was reclining at the table with the greatest man in Jewish history! The picture is of the house of God and the feast He prepares for those who come into His presence. Even though Lazurus had a diseased earthly life and had to beg to exist, he shared the place of honor with the greatest father of Israel.d) In Luke 23One of the thieves crucified with Christ said, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom! And [Jesus] said to him, Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in paradise" (vv. 42-43). Where is paradise? Some people say Christ is referring to an intermediary state or limbo. But another New Testament reference where the same word occurs clarifies its meaning. In 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 Paul discusses an experience he had that he didn't fully understand: "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago--whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows--such a man was caught up to the third heaven. And I know how such a man--whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows--was caught up into Paradise." It's reasonable to conclude that whatever paradise was before Christ's resurrection, it was the same thing. Second Corinthians 12 makes it clear that paradise is a synonym for heaven.When a saint died, he entered the presence of God--heaven itself-- for the celebration and banquet that the Father had prepared. There the saints know all the joy that God can possibly provide His children. Whether a believer died before or after Christ's resurrection, I believe he went home to be with the Lord.

REVIEW

Heaven is a place where God lives with His holy angels and believers who have died. Heaven is also a sphere. Although many Christians still live in this world, they also live in the heavenlies. They enjoy a taste of heaven's benefits, such as eternal life and the fruit of the Spirit.

LESSON

II. WHERE HEAVEN IS

Heaven is an actual place just as Los Angeles is an actual place. But it's impossible to chart heaven's longitude or latitude because it can't be located geographically even in space. But it's a place where people who have glorified bodies, like Christ's resurrection body, will actually live. After His resurrection Christ could eat, drink, walk, and talk. He could be touched and recognized when He allowed Himself to be. Heaven is a place for real, not ethereal, people.

A. The Direction

Heaven is up. In 2 Corinthians 12:2 Paul says that he was caught up to the third heaven. Ephesians 4:8-10 points out that when Jesus came to earth, He descended and when He returned to heaven, He ascended. Acts 1 tells us that Jesus ascended into heaven. While the disciples watched, two angels said, "This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven" (v. 11). Discussing the rapture, 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 says the Lord will catch us up into heaven. When God examines His creatures, He looks down (Ps. 53:2); when man seeks God, he looks up (Ps. 121:1). The apostle John saw a door open in heaven and heard a voice inviting him to "come up" (Rev. 4:1). John pictured the New Jerusalem, the eternal home of the saints, as coming down out of heaven (Rev. 21:10).

B. The Distance

Second Corinthians 12:2 refers to the "third" heaven. From the earth's surface and extending upward 7-10 miles is a region called the troposphere; extending beyond that is the stratosphere; extending beyond that approximately 50 miles is the mesosphere; extending beyond that 250 miles or more is the ionosphere; extending beyond that to the outer limits of a planet's atmosphere is the exosphere, beyond which is infinite space. Beyond them all is the third heaven.

During 1973 and 1974 a Pioneer Spacecraft passed Jupiter, which is millions of miles from earth. Our most recent satellites are designed to go even farther. But none of them have reached heaven. The moon is 252,000 miles from the earth, but that's still relatively close. If you walked 24 miles a day, theoretically you could arrive there in about 28 years, but you wouldn't be much closer to heaven.

A ray of light travels from the earth to the moon in about 1.5 seconds because it's traveling 186,000 miles per second. Perhaps if we could travel at that incredible speed, we could reach heaven. Traveling 186,000 miles per second, we would arrive on the planet Mercury in about 4 minutes and 30 seconds because it's only 57 million miles from the earth. As we traveled to Mercury, we would reach Venus in about 2 minutes and 20 seconds because it's only 26 million miles away. To span the 390 million miles between earth and Jupiter would take about 35 minutes. The 793 million miles to Saturn would take about an hour and 10 minutes. Uranus, named for the Greek word ouranos, which means "heaven," is about 1.5 billion miles away. Neptune is about 2.7 billion miles away, and Pluto a billion more than that (Robert Jastrow and Malcolm Thompson, *Astronomy: Fundamentals and Frontiers* [Santa Barbara: John Wiley and Sons, 1977], p. 348). But after traveling that far, we would still be on the front porch of our solar system and well within our own galaxy!

The earth is one of nine planets revolving around the sun. It has a diameter of 8,000 miles and an estimated mass of about 6.6×10^{21} tons. That massive sphere revolves on its axis, remaining 93 million miles from our sun. The sun has a diameter of about 864 thousand miles and a mass 332 thousand times larger than the earth. But it's only one star in a galaxy of billions of other stars! Distances in the universe are so great that they have to be measured by the speed of light--186,000 miles per second or 11,160,000 miles per minute. For example our sun is about 8 light minutes away.

Our solar system has a diameter of approximately 700 light minutes--8 billion miles--but the galaxy that contains it has a diameter of 100 thousand light years and is one of billions of galaxies (*Astronomy: Fundamentals and Frontiers*, pp. 4, 12). Nevertheless Jesus said to the thief dying next to Him, "Today you shall be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43; emphasis added). Only God could bridge such distances.

III. WHAT HEAVEN IS LIKE

A. A General Overview

1. By Ezekiel

Our first view of heaven comes from the prophet Ezekiel. God wonderfully revealed to him by a vision what heaven is like. Ezekiel 1:4-28 says, "As I looked, behold, a storm wind was coming from the north, a great cloud with fire flashing forth continually and a bright light around it, and in its midst something like glowing metal in the midst of the fire. And within it there were figures resembling four living beings. And this was their appearance: they had human form. Each of them had four faces and four wings. And their legs were straight and their feet were like a calf's hoof, and they gleamed like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides were human hands. As for the faces and wings of the four of them, their wings touched one another; their faces did not turn when they moved, each went straight forward. As for the form of the their faces, each had the face of a man, all four had the face of a lion on the right and the face of a bull on the left, and all four had the face of an eagle. Such were their faces. Their wings were spread out above; each had two touching another being, and two covering their bodies. And each went straight forward; wherever the spirit was about to go, they would go, without turning as they went. In the midst of the living beings there was something that looked like burning coals of fire, like torches darting back and forth among the living beings. The fire was bright, and lightning was flashing from the fire. And the living beings ran to and fro like bolts of lightning.

"Now as I looked at the living beings, behold, there was one wheel on the earth beside the living beings, for each of the four of them. The appearance of the wheels and their workmanship was like sparkling beryl [a multi-colored stone], and all four of them had the same form, their appearance and workmanship being as if one wheel were within another. Whenever they moved, they moved in any of their four directions, without turning as they moved. As for their rims they were lofty and awesome, and the rims of all four of them were full of eyes round about. And whenever the living beings moved, the wheels moved with them. And whenever the living beings rose from the earth, the wheels rose also. Wherever the spirit was about to go, they would go in that direction. And the wheels rose close beside them; for the spirit of the living beings was in the wheels. Whenever those went, these went; and whenever those stood still, these stood still. And whenever those rose from the earth, the wheels rose close beside them; for the spirit of the living beings was in the wheels.

"Now over the heads of the living beings there was something like an expanse, like the awesome gleam of crystal, extended over their heads. And under the expanse their wings were stretched out straight, one toward another; each one also had two wings covering their bodies on the one side and on the other. I also heard the sound of their wings like the sound of abundant waters as they went, like the voice of the Almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of an army camp; whenever they stood still, they dropped their wings. And there came a voice from above the expanse that was over their heads; whenever they stood still, they dropped their wings.

"Now above the expanse that was over their heads there was something resembling a throne, like lapis lazuli in appearance; and on that which resembled a throne, high up, was a figure with the appearance of a man. Then I noticed from the appearance of His loins and upward something like glowing metal that looked like fire all around within it, and from the appearance of His lions and downward I saw something like fire; and there was a radiance around Him. As the appearance of the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell on my face."

That is Ezekiel's description of God's throne in heaven. We can't fully understand all he described, and neither did he. But under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he attempted to describe what he saw: blazing light reflected off polished jewels and colored wheels of light mingled with angelic beings (the "living beings"). Around the throne of the eternal, glorious God, he saw a flashing, sparkling, spinning

rainbow of brilliance. In referring to the faces of the angelic creatures some say the lion refers to majesty and power, the man to intelligence and will, the ox to patient service, and the eagle to swift judgment. Although it's hard to interpret the specifics, we can say this is describing the sovereignty, majesty, and glory of God and the incredible beauty, symmetry, and perfection of His heaven. The wheels that moved in concert, the flashing lightning, the sparkling jewels, and the brilliant light all picture God's glory. Ezekiel gave us a picture of heaven, but it's beyond our ability to fathom.

2. By John

In the book of Revelation we begin to see more of the details. The Greek word translated "heaven" occurs over fifty times in the book. Twice God is called "the God of heaven" (11:13; 16:11). In chapter 4 John says, "After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven, and the first voice which I had heard, like the sound of a trumpet speaking with me, said, Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things. Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne was standing in heaven, and One sitting on the throne" (vv. 1-2).

a) Heaven's throne Ezekiel ended chapter 1 with a description of God's throne and the inexplicable glory of heaven. John begins by describing that throne. Repeatedly in this passage he mentions the throne, which is the center of heaven and the focal point of God's presence. (1) Its Occupant Verse 3 says, "He who was sitting was like a jasper stone." Jasper is an opaque crystalline quartz of differing colors, especially shades of green. The jasper of ancient times was more transparent. Verse 3 adds that God was like "a sardius in appearance." The red sardius may speak of God as Redeemer, the One who provided a blood sacrifice. If that is its significance, it highlights the glory of God's redemptive character. Jasper and Sardius were the first and last of the twelve stones on the breastplate of the high priest (Ex. 28:17, 20). They represented Reuben, Jacob's oldest son, and Benjamin, his youngest. Thus in a sense God pictures Himself as embracing Israel. (2) Its surroundings Sounding much like Ezekiel, John continues, "There was a rainbow around the throne, like an emerald in appearance.... And from the throne proceed flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder" (vv. 3-5). At Mount Sinai, when God came down to give the law there was thundering and lightning (Ex. 19:16). The writers of Scripture, seeking to describe the indescribable, portray the presence of God as filled with thunder and lightning, blinding light, and a sparkling, dazzling array of colors and rainbows. John continues his description of the scene around the throne: "There were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God" (v. 5). That doesn't teach that there are seven Holy Spirits. Rather there is one, seven-fold Spirit, described in Isaiah 11:2 as (1) the Spirit of the Lord, (2) the Spirit of wisdom, (3) the Spirit of understanding, (4) the Spirit of counsel, (5) the Spirit of strength, (6) the Spirit of knowledge, and (7) the Spirit of the fear of the Lord. Verse 6 says, "Before the throne there was, as it were, a sea of glass like crystal." Picture the beauty of that scene: a brilliant rainbow and the flashing colors of emerald, sardius, and jasper all splashing off a sea of crystal! Scripture uses color, light, and crystal to reflect the splendor and majesty of the throne of God. In Exodus 24 "Moses went up with Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and they saw the God of Israel; and under His feet there appeared to be a pavement of sapphire, as clear as the sky itself" (vv. 9-10). That is a description of heaven. It's a real place where God dwells. In heaven is a throne from which comes flashing and sparkling light, and beneath it is a crystal clear, brilliant, sparkling sea of glass. It's described as sapphire in one passage because of the color reflecting off it and as clear in another because it merely picks up the color that sparkles from the presence of the One who occupies the throne. Ezekiel described it as the color of dazzling crystal stretched across the sky.

Glimpses of Heaven?

Heaven is not a land of shadows and mists. Some people who were supposedly dead and then resuscitated claim to have seen heaven. When asked what it was like, many say it was like a light at the end of a long tunnel. Books describing such experiences are very popular. But heaven is some

light at end of a dark tunnel, or one sparkler in the middle of darkness. It's brilliance is magnificent beyond description!

(3) Its observers In Revelation 4:4 John says, "Around the throne were twenty-four thrones; and upon the thrones I saw twenty- four elders sitting, clothed in white garments and golden crowns on their heads." I believe those elders represent the new priesthood, the church in heaven. We will be reigning with God in the midst of a crystal sea that flashes and sparkles with His splendor. Verse 6 adds that around the throne were four living creatures-- probably a reference to angelic beings, perhaps cherubim. Surrounding the throne is the angelic host and the redeemed church; occupying the throne is God Himself in all the glory of His majestic revelation.b) Heaven's temple The two major buildings of any ancient city were the palace and the temple. They represented human and divine rule. In heaven there is a throne, which portrays God as the majestic Sovereign, and a temple, which portrays Him as One who should be worshiped. In Revelation 3:12 Christ says, "He who overcomes [referring to the Christian], I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore." Believers will be the pillars of God's temple. In Revelation 7:15 one of the twenty-four elders, speaking of saints who have come out of the Great Tribulation, says, "They are before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne shall spread His tabernacle over them." Christians will serve God in that Temple. In Revelation 11:19 John says, "The temple of God which is in heaven was opened; and the ark of His covenant appeared in His temple, and there were flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder and an earthquake and a great hailstorm." In chapter 15 John says, "I looked, and the temple of the tabernacle of testimony in heaven was opened" (v. 5). Those passages make it clear that there is a Temple in heaven. However in Revelation 21:22 John says, "I saw no temple in it [the New Jerusalem], for the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb, are its temple." The Temple of that city isn't a place where God dwells--God Himself is the temple. Attempting to reconcile Revelation 21:22 with the previous passages, some Bible scholars argue that presently there is a Temple in heaven, but when God constructs the new heavens and earth, there won't be. However I believe Revelation 21:22 defines the Temple--it isn't a building; it's the Lord Himself. By saying believers will be pillars in that Temple, Christ promised us a place forever in the very presence of God.

Focusing on the Facts

1. Who are the inhabitants of heaven?
2. Explain the teaching of limbus patrum.
3. What passages in the psalms imply that there was no intermediary state for Old Testament believers? Explain.
4. Explain the phrase "Abraham's bosom" (Luke 16:22).
5. Where is "paradise"? Support your answer with Scripture.
6. According to the Bible, heaven is in what direction is heaven?
7. Distances in the universe are so great that they have to be measured by the speed of _____, which is _____ per second.
8. What Old Testament prophet gives us the first comprehensive view of heaven? In what chapter of his book?
9. Summarize that prophet's description of heaven.
10. What may be the significance of the sardius stone in Revelation 4:3?
11. In what Old Testament context were the jasper and sardius stones used together? What is its significance in Revelation 4:3 (Ex. 28:17, 20)?
12. What does John mean by "the seven Spirits of God" (Isa. 11:2)?
13. Why is the sea before God's throne likened to sapphire in one passage and clear glass in another?

14. Whom does John see around the throne?

15. Explain Revelation 21:22. How can one reconcile its meaning with passages such as Revelation 11:19?

Pondering the Principles

1. As believers, we have the hope that once we leave these bodies, we will enter the presence of God. Christ's death and resurrection assure us of that hope, freeing us from the fear of death (Heb. 2:14-15). Knowing that death ushers us into God's presence is a great comfort because each of us will have to face death (Phil. 1:21-24). God also uses such knowledge to comfort us when we have to deal with the death of a family member or close friend (1 Thess. 4:13-14). First Corinthians 15 tells us that ultimately we will see death completely destroyed and will receive imperishable bodies. Take time now to meditate on those truths and thank God for the sacrifice of Christ by which He delivered "those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives" (Heb. 2:15).

2. Seeing Ezekiel and the apostle John struggle to describe the indescribable, we understand that even if God had revealed all the details about heaven, we wouldn't be able to know or understand them. It's so unlike what we know. But in Ephesians 2 Paul gives us some insight into heaven we can understand because it draws on our experience. Read verses 1-6, noting the incredible grace that God demonstrated in saving you. Aren't you overwhelmed each day with God's grace to you? Now read Ephesians 2:7. Although there is no description of what heaven looks like, note the vivid description of what it will be like: "in the ages to come [God will] show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." Since you have experienced the riches of His grace in your life here, you can look with anticipation toward the greater riches of heaven.

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2026 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<https://www.gty.org/about#copyright>).