

Heaven

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Scripture: Isaiah 65:17–19,
2 Peter 3:11–14, Revelation 21:1–8

We will consider the glorious place we call “heaven” for at least three reasons.

The first reason we’re considering heaven is because past generations of Christians thought about heaven more than most of us do. There are reasons for that which I won’t get into right now, but suffice it to say, we don’t think about something we don’t see or hear much about but instead tend to focus more on what is right in front of us. We sometimes lament, as Christians, how earth-bound we tend to be. Our busyness, materialistic tendencies, and relatively affluent lives compared with many others on earth don’t help with this struggle. Yes, we certainly are in need of genuine, Spirit-wrought revival.

Second, another related reason for considering heaven is to motivate believers to live more sacrificial, holy lives; willing to give up some present-life comfort in order to win souls, impact those around us for the kingdom, and prepare our own hearts and minds for the greater glory to come.

Third, I hope and pray—for those who do not yet have a good hope of glory—that at last you might hear something of the glory of God in that place and begin for the first time in your life to be convicted that this life isn’t

all there is—that there is some thing and some One far more glorious and satisfying to live for.

Let us pray for these things, beloved, even now. The Lord is so gracious and merciful; who can tell if He might, in answer to our supplications, pour out His blessings upon us?

Our texts are 2 Corinthians 12:2, 4–5a and Revelation 21:1: “I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven.... How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. Of such an one will I glory.... And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away and there was no more sea.” Our theme is:

Heaven

1. The first heaven
2. The new heaven and new earth

As we begin to consider the glory of the hereafter, we want to distinguish between what we call “heaven” from what follows heaven, namely the new heaven and the new earth.

Heaven is that place, that state that a saved person enters into when he dies. The body, of course, remains here on earth, but the essence of who we are—which we commonly refer to as the soul—goes there, to heaven.

The *new heaven* and *the new earth*, on the other hand, is the eternal destination that a saved person’s soul and body go to immediately after the final judgment, presided over by the returning glorious Lord Jesus.

To prove the existence of heaven, we need go no further than the cross of Jesus, where He answers the

simple prayer of the thief crucified beside Him, saying, “To day thou shalt be with me in paradise,” which is to say that Jesus promised the thief that, immediately after dying, he would be with Jesus in heaven. Of course Jesus’s *body* lay in the grave three days, which shows that their being with each other would take place in heaven as a fellowship of souls absent their bodies. The thief’s remains are, to this day, still somewhere on earth and will remain so until the resurrection day—the day of the Lord.

After the final judgment, however, those who are truly saved will enter into a glorious place, a place prepared by the Lord for believers’ reunited souls and bodies. This is the place John saw in Revelation 21 which he called “the new heaven and the new earth,” the final destination of all those who love the Lord in sincerity.

We have one more matter to deal with before considering glory hereafter. There are three unique places referred to as “heaven” in Scripture. In Bible times, the Jews referred to the first heaven as that which we today call the “sky.” In Genesis 1, God describes a *firmament* that divides the waters on the earth’s surface from the water in the clouds. Genesis 1:8 says, “And God called the firmament Heaven.” This would be the first heaven mentioned in Scripture.

The idea of a second heaven is also rooted in the creation history, for in Genesis 1:14, God, speaking of the sun and moon, said, “Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night.” This second heaven refers to what we today call “outer space.” This is the place where the sun, moon, and stars are located. David refers to this in Psalm 8, “When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained.”

But what the apostle Paul referred to as the third heaven is that which we want to consider during our time of worship. The apostle, in reference to himself, wrote, “I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago... caught up to the third heaven.” Paul went on to describe this vision: “He was caught up into paradise and heard unspeakable words which it is not lawful for a man to utter.” What he saw and heard we do not know; he doesn’t say. But it’s quite clear he was speaking of what we today call “heaven.”

With these distinctions in mind, and with God’s help, let us consider this third heaven.

The Third Heaven

Would it surprise you that there are 551 references to heaven in Scripture? We remember that the word “heaven” often refers to the sky or space, but still, this is a staggering number of references! You have to wonder if God named the sky and space *heaven* to help remind us often about the other heaven, the third heaven.

As we have already briefly considered the reality of heaven, it shouldn’t surprise us that we see an awareness of it early in Scripture. Both Melchizedek and Abraham refer to God as the possessor of heaven and earth. God spoke to Abraham out of heaven. Jacob called Bethel the gate of heaven after he dreamt his famous dream. Moses said these memorable words in Deuteronomy 10: “Behold, the heaven and the heaven of heavens is the Lord’s thy God, the earth also, with all that therein is,” and goes on to describe God’s blessing on obedience this way: “That your days may be multiplied and the days of your children, in the land which the LORD sware unto your fathers to give them, as the days of heaven upon the earth.” What a beautiful expression and confession of

faith, “as the days of heaven upon the earth.” In Deuteronomy 26, Moses prayed to God, “Look down from thy holy habitation, from heaven, and bless thy people.”

But not only did the saints know of heaven, they sought it earnestly! Hebrews 11 says that Abraham, “looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God” and he, with other Old Testament believers, desired, “a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God was not ashamed to be called their God: for he prepared for them a city.” May David’s confession be ours, beloved, “As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness.” The early saints recognized, thought of, and sought heaven.

Second, heaven is described in Scripture as God’s dwelling place. The prophet Micah once prophesied, “I saw the LORD sitting on his throne and all the host of heaven standing by him on his right hand and on his left.” God gave this prophet a glimpse of heaven. Isaiah also wrote of what he was given to see of heaven, “I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple.” God Himself calls heaven “my throne” and the earth His “footstool.” In that place of glory, Psalm 22 says God inhabits (i.e. lives in) the praises of His people, all honor and glory continuously ascribed to Him.

Third, even though heaven is God’s dwelling place, it is still a created place. Because it is a creation, just like earth, God overflows even heaven. In Solomon’s prayer, at the dedication of the first temple, he confessed, “Will God indeed dwell on the earth? behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have built.” We remind one another that before creation, as hard as it is for us to fathom, there was

no place. There was only God who, being a Spirit, doesn't need a physical dwelling. This means heaven, as a creation of God, was not made for Himself, because He needed no such place to live in, but it was made for us, who are His, that we might live with Him. Just like the Garden of Eden was specially prepared by God for the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, so heaven was prepared by God for all men and women renewed by His grace and Spirit. Heaven is proof, just like the cross, that God is willing to love, save, transform, and dwell with sinners-turned-saints forever.

Elijah is there now, carried by a whirlwind into heaven. Moses is with God there, as are Paul and all the godly persons who lived and died in faith, including so many whom we have known and loved. They are alive. They are in heaven. They are with God!

Lest we think we need to be someone great or special to be there, God gives this precious encouragement in Isaiah 57:5, "For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones." And if we feel unfit for that holy place with God (and who doesn't?), God gives us this precious encouragement and promise, "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land" (2 Chron. 7:14). Then there is Jesus's precious prayer in John 17, "Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory which thou hast given me."

So to review briefly what we have seen so far, what we call heaven is the third heaven, God's dwelling place. Old and New Testament saints knew of it, thought about it, and sought a place there with God, and so ought we to do, earnestly. Heaven itself is a creation. God made it, not so much for Himself but so that we who believe might be with Him.

What else do we know about heaven? Believers enter it immediately after they die. There's no waiting period, no preparatory suffering, etc. We know this from the aforementioned example of the thief on the cross. There was a man, being put to death for being a criminal, who if anyone qualified for something like purgatory, he certainly would have, for he had done nothing to recommend his immediate entrance into heaven. Yet Jesus's reply tells us that, notwithstanding all his sins, on the basis of faith in the crucified Savior alone, that man was to be with Jesus that very day in heaven. So shall it be, for all who mourn over sin and cling to the Savior for grace, the very instant they die—it will be instant glory.

Fifth, heaven is not only a place where we will see and be with God but it is a place of undescrivable joy and security and peace. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the saved sinner Lazarus was said to be "in Abraham's bosom," i.e. resting on Abraham. The weariness of his earthly suffering was forever past. Jesus went on to say that this Lazarus was now comforted. Immediately after he died, immeasurable comfort swept over him, and no wonder—he was with the Lord in eternal bliss. As we saw earlier, Paul wrote about a time when God gave him a glimpse of heaven, calling the place that he saw "paradise." In Daniel 12, we read, "They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament."

Those that confessed Christ here before men will hear Christ confess them before His Father in heaven (Matt. 10:32). Imagine the comfort that will be!

But as glorious as heaven shall be, we get a sense from Revelation 6:9 and 20:4 that, although the saints shall already reign with Christ while in heaven, there will be a sense of anticipation, a desire to see justice meted out in full, with a final resolution to all things—anticipating of course the day of the Lord, when Christ shall come to judge all persons. We are assured by the Lord Himself that that day shall come.

Sixth, though all who are in heaven will be filled with the utmost joy, Scripture teaches there will be degrees of glory in heaven. For example, concerning those who suffer for Christ's sake and the gospel, Jesus said, "Rejoice and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven." With respect to those who do and teach God's commandments, "the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." In fact, our Lord encourages us to prepare for greater glory, saying, "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven" going on to describe how to do so.

Seventh, we also know there will be fellowship in heaven, not only with God, but among the saints as well. In Matthew 8:11, Jesus said, "Many shall come from the east and west and shall sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." On the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter readily was able to identify Moses and Elijah who, we read, "appeared in glory," speaking with Jesus about His coming death.

But of all the joys of heaven, none will compare with fellowship with Jesus Christ and the Father and the Holy Spirit. Christ is there, beloved! "For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear

in the presence of God for us” (Heb. 9:24). We are assured in

1 John 3:2 that “we shall see him as he is.”

Our challenge, of course, is that all of these glories—of seeing God and enjoying perfect peace, security, joy, fellowship, etc.—are not seen with our natural eyes, but are only apprehended by faith. So we need to beseech the Lord that we might exercise faith in His description of glory in order to be more heavenly minded, even as the apostle describes in Philippians 3:20, “For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” Heavenly mindedness would be such a great help also for life now. “How?” you might ask.

Heavenly mindedness, to name just one important benefit, would be helpful in times of affliction and loss. Hebrews 10:34 describes saints who joyfully endured the taking away of their possessions, knowing they had “in heaven a better and an enduring substance.” Along these same lines, Peter encouraged tried and troubled saints, pointing them to their “inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that fades not away, reserved in heaven for you.” Paul wrote of “the hope which is laid up for us in heaven.” So powerful can this anticipation of glory be that it was used of God to help believers endure horrible persecutions. Hebrews 11:34 relates, “Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection.”

The glories of heaven are great, far outweighing the very best we could ever have or experience here on earth. They are worthy to be pursued with the greatest desires and efforts God’s grace can work in us. Still, as magnificent as heaven shall be, more than making up for all the self-denial, suffering, and spiritual warfare

endured in this life, heaven is but a prelude of that unspeakably greater glory that follows, namely, the new heaven and the new earth.

The New Heaven and New Earth

This earth is old—just over six thousand years old in fact. But it's also old in sin, showing everywhere the scars of the Fall and particularly in its dreaded effects in the lives of people. But this old world will not continue indefinitely; there comes an end. Thankfully, Scripture gives us clarity regarding this.

In Matthew 24:35, Jesus plainly said, “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.” In Mark 13:25 He further explained, “And the stars of heaven shall fall, and the powers that are in heaven shall be shaken.” In addition to earlier signs that the end is near, Jesus mentions, as indicating His imminent return, “And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken” (Luke 21:25–26).

Yet, at those very moments when ungodly men will recognize their folly, too late of course, Jesus comforts His disciples by saying, “When these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh” (Luke 21:28). He knows what He has prepared for His beloved people in the new heaven and new earth!

In that final day, the angels will gather the godly who will be alive on the earth. “And then shall he send his angels, and shall gather together his elect from the four

winds, from the uttermost part of the earth to the uttermost part of heaven” (Mark 13:27). This day was greatly anticipated, even by the Old Testament saints. Only seven generations after Adam and Eve, Enoch foretold, “Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints to execute judgment upon all” (Jude 1:14). And who can forget Job’s remarkable confession of faith, “For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God” (Job 19:25). What remarkable foresight God gave Job!

Christ Jesus, having purchased His people’s right to glory, speaks with joy as He describes their entrance into it, “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matt. 25:34). What a wonder!

The way that final day unfolds is detailed in God’s Word. In 1 Thessalonians 4:16 we read, “For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first.” Those who had long since died, trusting in Christ by faith, their souls and bodies will at last be reunited; not as they once were, but altogether fitted for the new heaven and new earth. In 1 Corinthians 15 we find these lovely couplets:

“Sown in corruption...raised in incorruption.”

“Sown in dishonor...raised in glory.”

“Sown in weakness...raised in power.”

“Sown a natural body...raised a spiritual body.”

“As we have borne the image of the earthly, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly.”

“The dead shall be raised incorruptible and we shall be changed.”

Those who are alive on earth when Jesus returns in glory will be changed in an instant from how they are to how they will be in the glory of the new heaven and new earth. Scripture is full of descriptions of the glory of what lies ahead in that final glorious place God has prepared for His redeemed. “Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matt. 13:43).

“And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful” (Rev. 21:2–5).

Every joy on this earth is fleeting—it never lasts. The joys of sin, however pleasurable in the moment, are like a poison that eventually destroys the one who partakes of it. Even the lawful joys God gives us to enjoy—and there are many—are not meant to make us want to stay here forever. They are, as one described them, so many fingers pointing us to the God of glory and the lasting wonders He promises to His children.

As the Father loves to honor His beloved Son, so it shall be then as well, “In the dispensation of the fulness of times he will gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth, even in him” (Eph. 1:10). “Then shall the King say unto them

on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matt. 25:34). Don’t you want to hear those blessed words, beloved? You realize, of course, that it is in this life that your eternal destination is determined. In Matthew 18:3, Jesus said, “Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.”

“Repent ye therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:19).

“Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able” (Luke 13:24).

“This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever: and the bread that I give is my flesh, which I give for the life of the world” (John 6:50–51).

“Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2).

“Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation. For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him” (1 Thess. 5:6–10). Amen.