

Heaven

God's Eternal Rest for Believers

The Doctrine of Heaven

December 11, 2013

Introduction

While the subject of hell has been widely marginalized in recent decades, belief in heaven has gained a wide following among peoples of a variety of religious backgrounds. In fact, the vast majority of people believe they will wind up in heaven eventually. But cultural beliefs about heaven are often misdirected, and sometimes patently false. Believing in heaven does not guarantee one will enter there — even a belief in the biblical heaven. The only means by which we may enter heaven is through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Just as He holds the keys to death and Hades (Rev 1:18), so also Christ is the only way to heaven (John 14:6).

Biblical Terms & Concepts

This study will examine the biblical doctrine of heaven. As with the doctrine of hell, there are many nuances to the doctrine of heaven, and we cannot apply a generic one-size-fits-all model to every reference to eternity. Each biblical concept must be understood in relation to the others.

Heaven (Gk. *ouranos* οὐρανός), (Heb. *shāmayim* שָׁמַיִם) — This term occurs numerous times in both testaments and can have one of three meanings. In 2 Corinthians 12:2, Paul refers to the third heaven. This is what most people typically think of when they hear the term. The others can be broken down as follows:

- 1st Heaven — This refers to the “sky” and generally includes anything within earth’s atmosphere (e.g. the “birds of heaven” in 2 Sam 21:10 and Rev 19:17).
- 2nd Heaven — This refers to the cosmic heavens and includes all celestial objects in the universe (sun, moon, stars, galaxies, etc.).

3rd Heaven — This refers to the dwelling place of God. Although it could be located beyond the 2nd heavens, this does not mean God is somehow distant from or disinterested in the affairs of humanity. We should also recognize that while God is omnipresent (everywhere), He chooses to manifest His presence in a special way in the throne room of heaven. This is currently the location where both God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ are seated (Eph 1:20; Heb 8:1).

Any believer who dies today will be immediately ushered into the presence of the Lord in the third heavens (2 Cor 5:8; John 14:1–3; Phil 3:20; Heb 4:1–10).

Paradise (παράδεισος) — Paradise was the upper compartment of Sheol (the grave) where the righteous went prior to the resurrection of Christ. This is where both Jesus and the thief on the cross went at death. At Jesus' resurrection, this entire compartment was relocated to the third heaven. This is where Paul was taken and given "visions and revelations" having gone into the "third heaven...into paradise" where he heard inexpressible words, which man is not permitted to speak (2 Cor 12:1–4). This term occurs three times in the New Testament — Luke 23:43; 2 Cor 12:4; Rev 2:7.

Millennial Kingdom — Every born-again saint from both the Old Testament and New Testament eras will be resurrected and given new glorified bodies. This will occur at either the rapture (for church-age believers) or the Second Coming of Christ (Old Testament and Tribulation saints). The glorified church saints will return from heaven to earth with Jesus at His Second Coming. These glorified saints will participate in the rule and administration of Christ's Millennial Kingdom here on this earth. While this is not "heaven" per se, it will be a very utopian-like society. Those who have already been glorified will dwell in sinless bodies and act in perfect righteousness. This blessed state will continue for 1,000 years.

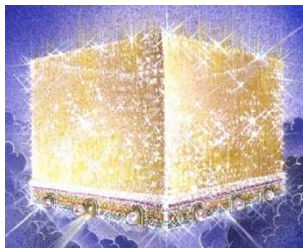
New Heavens & New Earth — Following the Great White Throne Judgment (Rev 20:11–15), the present heavens and earth will be destroyed with fire (2 Pet 3:7–13). These will be replaced by a new creation — a new heavens and a new earth. These will function in much the same way as the present heavens and earth: God the

Father will reign from heaven and resurrected/glorified people will inhabit the new earth. Christ Himself will also dwell on the new earth in its capital city — the New Jerusalem.

New Jerusalem — The New Jerusalem is a city in which the righteous from all ages will dwell for eternity. It is described in great detail in Revelation 21–22. The city is laid out in the shape of a cube. Its dimensions are given in Revelation 21:16 as 12,000 stadia (1,380 miles) per side. If this city were placed on the present earth, it would cover nearly $\frac{2}{3}$ of the continental United States and the ceiling would extend into the exosphere of the planet. However, God may choose to create a much larger New Earth to accommodate this size. Since God can both create and alter the laws of physics; this large city (and possibly a larger New Earth) will not be subject to any adverse effects from the crushing weight of gravity. The city itself is constructed out of the finest materials — precious gems, pearls for gates, and streets paved with gold. Many people tend to associate these things with heaven, but this is not technically correct. These items belong to the New Jerusalem. The centerpiece of the city will be Christ Himself, whose radiance will provide light for the entire city (Rev 21:23).



New Jerusalem
Size Comparison



The New Jerusalem



Pearl Gate

(artist's renderings)

Eternal State — This refers to the eternal, ongoing state in the New Heavens, New Earth, and New Jerusalem. Since Christ's kingdom will last forever (Dan 2:44), we understand that this eternal state will be an extension of the Millennial Kingdom, but on a much grander scale.

Questions Regarding Eternity

The Bible provides several details about heaven and the eternal state. But what does this mean for you and me? What will the future look like

for a Christian who dies today? These questions can easily be answered if we trace our way through the “stages” of heaven. Let’s assume that Christ has not yet returned to rapture the church. Where will a believer go when he or she dies?

Step 1 — The believer’s soul and spirit are immediately ushered by the angels into the presence of Christ in heaven. The believer will remain there in conscious bliss until the time of the rapture.

Step 2 — The believer’s soul and spirit are brought with Christ back to the earth at the rapture. Each person’s physical body is resurrected and joined with his/her soul and spirit. At this point, the believer has a glorified body. These glorified saints are now taken back to heaven to be with Christ.

Step 3 — Each believer is judged at the Bema seat of Christ according to his/her works. The more good works a person has done, the greater will be their reward. Any useless, worthless works that have no eternal value will be burned away as dross. Sin, however, will not be a part of this judgment. It has already been judged at the cross for the believer.

Step 4 — The church will remain in heaven for the duration of the seven year Tribulation period.

Step 5 — Every church-age saint will participate in the wedding feast of the Lamb. This event will occur in two phases. It will begin in heaven (the bride’s home) and conclude at the beginning of the Millennial Kingdom on earth (the Groom’s home). This event will celebrate the marriage of Christ and His bride — the church.

Step 6 — Church-age saints will rule with Christ over His kingdom. Those who received greater reward at the Bema seat judgment will enjoy greater positions of authority in this kingdom. As the bride of Christ, the church will function in the capacity of a queen (or the royal family). They will have authority over Old Testament saints, Tribulation saints, and living but unglorified Jews & Gentiles.

Step 7 — Following the judgment of unbelievers at the Great White Throne, the eternal state will begin. Since Revelation 21:24–26 mentions kings, nations, and servants (22:3), it is likely that the

same tiers of authority will extend into the eternal state as well. This means the church will continue to enjoy her privileged position as members of the royal family. The major difference between this and the Millennial Kingdom is that millennial saints will also be in their glorified bodies. This is the final and permanent situation of believers and will continue on throughout all of eternity.

Other lingering questions:

Q: *“Will we recognize one another in heaven?”*

A: After Jesus was raised from the dead, He had a glorified body. But this body was clearly recognizable to the disciples. Our bodies will be similarly recognizable to other believers.

Q: *“Do believers enter a kind of unconscious ‘soul-sleep’ if they die before the rapture?”*

A: No. Steven cried out to Christ in heaven to receive his spirit (Acts 7:59–60). Paul also says that to be absent from the body is to be at home with the Lord (2 Cor 5:8).

Q: *“Do believers become disembodied spirits if they die before the rapture?”*

A: No. Believers will receive an intermediate body in heaven prior to the rapture. This is the “building from God” (2 Cor 5:1) which will clothe believers who have not yet received their resurrection bodies. This body will merge with the glorified resurrection body at the rapture, much the same as Christ’s Millennial Kingdom will be merged with the eternal state. In this way, the intermediate body can be said to be “eternal” (2 Cor 5:1).

Q: *“Will there be any passing of time in the eternal state?”*

A: Yes. Revelation 22:2 speaks of the tree of life bearing twelve fruits, one each month. This could only occur if time continues to progress.

Q: *“What will life be like in eternity?”*

A: The Bible does not give us a “day in the life of...” picture of eternity. But it does give us several comforting terms to describe this state. It is a place of rest where believers cease from their labors (Heb 4:1–10). It is a place of joy, with pleasures forevermore (Psalm 16:11). It will also be a place without death or pain (Rev 21:4), and there will no longer be any curse (Rev 22:3). John

also speaks of a state of complete happiness where there is no more mourning or crying (Rev 21:4). Heaven will also be a place of unending love. In 1 Corinthians 13:1–13, Paul sets in contrast three abiding virtues — faith, hope, and love, with the greatest being love. Faith gives way to sight, and hope eventually yields to reality, but love endures on forever (1 Cor 13:13). Eternity will also involve unending worship and service of God (Rev 22:3). In as much as we see His face, we will worship Him and learn more about Him. But as finite, created beings, our learning will never fully exhaust the infinite depths of His character and love for us (Ecc 3:11).

Q: *“Someone I know had a near death experience and saw ‘the light at the end of the tunnel.’ Someone else claimed to have already been to heaven and seen the Lord. How do I respond to these accounts?”*

A: It is not out of the realm of possibility for someone to have a brush with death and see unexplainable things. But our experiences must be considered in light of the Scriptures. When Paul saw heaven in a vision, his description of it was “indescribable.” This means that heavenly things cannot be expressed in human words. Anyone who claims to have seen heaven and yet describes something that is contrary to the Scriptures is clearly a false witness. We should also not assume that just because someone has seen the proverbial “light at the end of the tunnel,” that means that they are genuinely saved. Salvation only comes by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Near death experiences can be subject to any number of influences. Since the body is already in a weakened, near death state, there is no way to authoritatively say that God is the author of a vision. The devil also likes to masquerade as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14). In the end, these experiences cannot be verified, nor can they be dismissed. They must simply be evaluated in light of God’s word.

Conclusion

God has written eternity into the heart of every human being (Ecc 3:11). We all will spend the countless ages of the future in one of two places: heaven or hell. Which would you prefer? Only those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior will see the true and everlasting light of heaven and the New Jerusalem. As long as we draw breath in this life, there is still opportunity to turn to Christ for salvation. Don’t let that door close for all of eternity!

~AWB