

Heaven: Our Eternal Home

by

Patrick Zukeran

The Facts on Heaven

“Heaven: Where is it and how do we get there?” That is a question Barbara Walters asked on a December 18, 2005 *ABC News* special. Walters stated in the program, “This is one of the most important pieces I’ve ever done.”¹ Indeed, what happens after death is one of the most important questions every person must answer. What we believe about the afterlife affects the way we live and shapes our values. Barbara Walter’s statement reveals the importance and value of this subject.

She also mentioned some significant statistics. She stated, “Nine out of ten Americans believe in an afterlife, and nearly as many believed a heaven exists.” She also states, “Here we are at a time when we are so technically oriented, and we have a bigger and bigger spiritual need. The popularity of books like Albom’s *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* indicates many people are searching for the purpose of life.”

Why the interest in heaven and life after death? The author of Ecclesiastes writes that God “... has also set eternity in the hearts of men...” Our creator has created us with a consciousness that there is more to understanding life than what is in this temporal world. The ultimate meaning of life must be understood in light of eternity, the full comprehension of which is beyond our capabilities at this time.² Since we are created in the image of God, we innately understand that we are eternal beings, there is a God, and there is life after death. This knowledge cannot be removed because God created us to know this. We also understand that without God or eternal life, our existence is essentially meaningless.

There are many views of heaven and what happens after death presented by various religions and worldviews. Barbara Walters stated that most of our

¹ Barbara Walters, “Heaven -- Where Is It? How Do We Get There?” www.abcnews.com, 20 December 2005.

² Tremper Longman, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI.: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 121.

concept of heaven comes from the media. For this reason, there are many misconceptions of heaven.

The truth on heaven comes from the Bible. There are several reasons we can trust its words. Jesus, the divine Son of God affirmed the authority of the Bible as the divinely inspired word of God. The New Testament Gospels which are a very accurate historical account, record that Jesus claimed to be the unique son of God and proved his claim to be true by his sinless miraculous life and resurrection. For more information, see the articles “Historical Reliability of the Gospels,” “The Uniqueness of Christ,” and “Resurrection: Fact or Fiction?”

Colossians 1:16 states, “For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities, all things were created by him and for him.” Christ, the creator and ruler of all things including heaven, reveals to us the truths about heaven in the Bible. Therefore, the Bible is our authoritative source in understanding heaven.

The Importance of Understanding Heaven

When I am walking on a golf course, I often find out which hole is the longest and look forward to facing that great challenge. When I arrive at a five hundred plus hole, I eagerly try to find the green. Often the green is so far away I cannot see it from the tee. What does a five hundred plus yard hole have to do with heaven? I like to imagine a line going from the tee extending over five hundred yards to the green as a line that represents eternity. As I walk along this line I remind myself that my life here on earth compared to eternity would only be a small dot on this line. In other words, we all will spend a lot more time in eternity than here on this earth. This often puts life in the proper perspective.

According to the Bible, heaven is our true home where our citizenship lies. Paul writes in Philippians 3:20-21,

“But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.”

We are citizens of God’s kingdom. Heaven is our true home. Our time here is temporary. Christians are not to live thinking this is their permanent home nor cling tightly to the things of this world as if this is all there is. In line with this, the writer of Hebrews states, that we are strangers in this land.

“These all (the saints before) died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly

one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.” (Heb 11:13-16)

The saints from generations past understood that this world was not their home. Thus, they were willing to leave their earthly homeland and live by faith knowing their destiny was a better, heavenly kingdom.

John also reminds us that this world is passing away.

“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 1:15-17)

John reminds us that this world will one day pass away when God judges the world (2 Peter 3:10). Knowing that this earth will pass, believers should not live for this world but for the eternal kingdom of God.

Understanding heaven helps us endure rather than escape the trials of this earth. Understanding eternity teaches us how to live according to wisdom (Psalm 90:12).

Three things will last for eternity: God, His word, and the souls of men and women. Understanding our destiny teaches us to invest our lives in the things that will last for eternity. A good starting point in our study of heaven will begin with the citizens of heaven.

Who Will Be in Heaven?

Part of the excitement of going to a party is knowing who will be there. When we know that someone important or friends whom we have not seen in a long time will be there, we look forward to a grand appointment. Knowing who will be in heaven should excite us for this grand meeting. Hebrews 12:22-23 states,

“But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect.”

From this passage we see the populace of heaven will include the Lord, the angels of God, and the redeemed from all the ages.

Heaven is where God abides. The Bible teaches that God is omnipresent and not localized in heaven. However, in heaven, God is manifested and His intimate presence is experienced in a special way. He is the centerpiece of the heavenly kingdom. He sits on His throne and Christ is seated at His right side (Romans 8:34). The throne of God is the heart and focus of heaven. In the book of Revelation, the throne of God is mentioned thirty-seven times.

In Isaiah 6:3, we have a beautiful picture of God seated on his throne and the seraphim encircle Him day and night shouting “holy, holy, holy.” We get another glimpse in Revelation 4:3-11.

“And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne. Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.”

All activity focuses in the direction of the throne and all glory emanates from there. God is the centerpiece of heaven, which makes it such a glorious place.

Many popular images of heaven reflect the values of the culture rather than Biblical teaching. The focus is often on our reunion with our loved ones or the discovery of the true meaning of our lives on earth. In the movie, “What Dreams May Come,” the main character Chris Nielson, played by Robin Williams, dies and goes to heaven. He discovers heaven to be a beautiful place, one that is created and fashioned by his thoughts and images. As he gains familiarity with his surroundings, he and his guide, played by Cuba Gooding, have a conversation. Robin Williams asks, as he gazes on the beauty of his heaven, “Where is God in all this?” Cuba Gooding responds, “He is up there somewhere shouting down that He loves us wondering why we can’t hear Him.”

Although a wonderful story, this is far from the teaching of heaven taught in the Bible. According to Scripture, God is central in heaven and all activity focuses around His magnificent throne. We will not wonder where God is or fail to hear His voice. Any portrayal of heaven that excludes God as the central feature of heaven fails to capture the real picture of eternity.

As in our present lives, ultimate meaning in eternity comes from our creator God, who makes heaven meaningful. He is the center of the Christian’s life and the focus of heaven. For this reason, heaven is for those who love God and have received His gift of eternal life given through His Son Jesus Christ. Those who willfully reject God in this lifetime and decide they do not want to have a relationship with Him, will not be forced against their will to be in His presence for all eternity. Heaven would not be a paradise for those who do not want to be with God. Instead it would be a painful ordeal.

I recently met a man who hated our present President with immense passion. Do you think my friend would have enjoyed attending an evening banquet honoring the President? Absolutely not! Even though it would be a fine and elegant event, it would be a distressful situation for him. In the same way, for those who reject God in this lifetime, a place like heaven would be intolerable for them since the God they rejected is the focal point of our existence there.

In heaven the glory, holiness, and the majesty of God will radiate throughout the entire realm. At this present time, fallen mankind is unable to see the glory of God (John 1:18). However, in heaven, man is perfected and glorified, sin and its effects are no longer present, and the redeemed will see the glorious majesty of God.

The Citizens of Heaven

As we studied previously, God is the focal point of heaven. Therefore, heaven is for those who have received Christ as Lord and Savior. Those who have rejected the Lordship of Christ in this life would not want to be in His presence for all eternity.

The second group of beings in heaven will be the angelic host. We will find ourselves surrounded by a myriad of angels. A popular notion is after death, men and women become angels. However, the Bible teaches that humans do not become angels. Angels are spiritual beings whose ministry is to worship the Lord and execute His commands. In Revelation 5:11, John records his vision of heaven stating, "Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand." In this passage, there will be an innumerable number of angels worshipping the Lord proclaiming, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth, and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" The focus of the angels will be on worshipping the Lord.

Finally, the spirits of departed Christians will be in heaven. Once again John states in Revelation 7:9, "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that not one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front the lamb." Not only will our loved ones be in heaven but saints from all the ages will be there as well. United in heart, mind, and spirit, we will worship and fellowship with one another and the Lord for all eternity. Friendships here on earth are very meaningful. However, when we are perfected, when the sin that hinders pure fellowship is removed, our relationships will be even sweeter.

In the popular media, the focus of heaven is often on the reunion with departed loved ones. Although this is a great hope, living eternally with sinful people would fall short of a perfect paradise. Heaven cannot be a perfect paradise unless our sin nature is eradicated. This is made possible only through the atoning work of Christ. God is perfect in His holiness. Therefore, sin and sinful people cannot dwell eternally in the intimate presence of God. The only way sin is dealt with in a just way is through the work of Christ on the cross. Only those who are cleansed by the blood of Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit can stand before a holy God.

So in heaven, we can expect to see the Lord, the angelic hosts, and Christians from all the ages. God is the focal point of heaven. We will be part of the great gathering of angels and perfected spirits of the redeemed who will dwell with God and one another forever.

The Glory of Heaven

If there is a word that describes the kingdom of heaven, the word glory would be an outstanding choice. Heaven is where we see God in His full glory. Probably the most anticipated moment for the Christian is seeing God face-to-face. This is called the beatific vision. In our present mortal and fallen sinful state, we cannot see God in all His complete glory (John 1:18, Exodus 33:18-23). However, in our glorified state, we will

see God. 1 Corinthians 13:12 states, “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror, then we shall see face to face.”

As a young boy, friends and relatives told me of the magnificent sunrise on Haleakala Crater in Maui. When I witnessed this sunrise for myself, I realized that despite the intensity of their descriptions, they fell short of describing the true beauty of this scene. So it is with our understanding of God and His glory. Presently, we are limited by our fallen and temporal state. However, in our eternal state, we will see His beauty face to face. Seeing the Lord will transform us forever.

Because the Lord’s glory radiates throughout heaven, we will quickly see that it is a place of indescribable glory (Romans 8:18, 2 Corinthians 12:2-4). Free from the damages of sin, we will behold a place of incredible beauty (1 Corinthians 2:9, Revelation 21:18-21). There will be no darkness for the glory of God will shine eternally. Revelation 22:4 states, “They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light.”

Seattle is given the nickname the “Emerald City. I had never seen Seattle and was anxious to gaze upon its beauty. However, when I first arrived in the fall, I was disappointed with what I saw. I did not find a city of emerald because it was overcast and gloomy. It remained this way for nearly six months. However, after a long and gloomy winter, the beauty of this fine city was revealed when the sun broke through the clouds and the emerald beauty of the city glimmered in the light of the sun. In the same way, heaven is a glorious and beautiful place because the glory of God shines upon the entire realm.

In Revelation 21, John describes the heavenly city. He is unable to describe the city in exact terms but uses imagery to try and capture the beauty of what he sees. He states that from its foundation to its walls, the city is made of what appears to be every precious stone imaginable. Even the streets of the city are “of pure gold, like transparent glass.” The heavenly city is made of every precious stone refined to be as smooth as glass. A city like this must radiate a dazzling glow.

Imagine a place where sin and its effects are no longer present. There is no death, corrosion, or deterioration. Add to this the image of a magnificent heavenly city made of what appears to be every precious stone fashioned to be as smooth as glass. Such a place would be beautiful, to say the least. Now add the glory of God shining upon the land and you have an incredibly divine and glorious kingdom.

The Joy of Heaven

Some of the most memorable moments in our lives include events like our graduation or wedding ceremony. There was excitement, joy, and happiness, the likes of which we rarely experience in our lifetime. For this reason, we often enjoy reliving those moments because the memories of those days warm our hearts. The atmosphere of heaven will be even grander than these events.

Heaven is a place of unending joy. We will experience an intimacy with God we could never have on earth. We will also be with the people of God whose heart and desire will be in accord with ours. When I travel and meet people from my hometown of Hawaii, there is often a connection we have because we share similar experiences and

loves. Imagine being in heaven where we will be with men and women who share a love for God as we do. The bonds of friendship we will have will be greater than any bond we experience here on earth.

Romans 8:20-22 states,

“The creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought forth into the glorious freedom of the children of God.”

The effects of sin have taken their toll on the created order and we long for the day when creation is restored. In heaven, our longings are realized because the effects of sin will not be present at all, no death, no sorrow, and no pain from the trials and tribulations of this fallen world. The curse of Genesis 3 will be overcome. Revelation 22:3 states, “No longer will there be any curse...” Since sin and its effects are no more, there is no more sickness (Revelation 22:2), no sorrow (Revelation 21:4), and no death (Revelation 21:4).

Our relationships will be at a different level as well. Since our sinful nature or the old man has been removed, we will relate to one another in a harmonious fashion. No longer will there be strife, jealousy, and anger that ruin fellowship. Our fellowship will be free from such hindrances. In Christ, our sinful nature is dealt with and will be erased in glory. That is why the Biblical teaching on heaven is more complete than what man could dream up on our own terms. For perfect harmony to exist in heaven, sin must be eradicated.

With creation restored and sin no longer present, heaven will be a place of abundant life (John 10:10, Revelation 22:1-2), overflowing joy (1 Timothy 6:17), and eternal rest (Hebrews 4:9, Revelation 14:13). This rest in Hebrews does not mean we will do nothing. We will experience a grand reunion (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18), worship the Lord (Revelation 4:8, 10, Isaiah 6:3), and serve Him (Revelation 22:3). The rest referred to in Hebrews refers to the end of our struggle against sin, the flesh, and the Satanic forces.

The greatest joy we experience on earth, will pale to the joy we will experience in eternity.

A Heavenly Dilemma

One of the most difficult questions I am asked is, “How can we be happy in heaven knowing a loved one is in Hell?” All of us have had loved ones who died without coming to faith in Christ and the thought of our loved ones in hell saddens us. Will this sorrow be ours in heaven as well?

First, understand that God’s love is infinitely greater than ours and yet He is joyful in heaven even though he knows many are in hell. He is infinitely more loving, caring and knowledgeable than we will ever be, yet His joy is not diminished. Although we may not fully understand how this is possible for God, we will learn from Him and share in His joy.

Second, we would not be joyful if we knew others were unjustly kept out, but those in hell did not want to be in heaven. For example, we can enjoy eating while others are starving if we first offered them food and they rejected it. God's free gift of eternal life was offered to all people and those who rejected it, did so by their own will. They did not want to be with God on earth, so the worst thing that could happen is to force them to be with God for eternity.

Third, we will see things from a different perspective. We will be eternal and know fully. From this perspective, we will understand why things are the way they are. My understanding of justice has changed dramatically from when I was a child to my perspective now as an adult. In the same way, our perspective from an eternal and glorified state will be different from our present state.

Fourth, if we believe that we could not be joyful in heaven while others are in hell, our joy is essentially in someone else's control. C.S. Lewis stated, "What some people say on earth is that final loss of one soul gives the lie to all the joy of those who are saved. The demand of the loveless and the self-imprisoned that they should be allowed to blackmail the universe: that till they consent to be happy not one else shall taste joy: that theirs should be the final power: that hell should be able to veto heaven (Is invalid).³ (Great Divorce, 124) Our joy rests on the will of God not on the decisions made by others.

Finally, since the Bible teaches that Jesus is the only way to God (John 14:6, Acts 4:12), we must pray for the salvation of our loved ones. If we have a sense of sorrow now thinking of the possibility that a loved one may not be with us in eternity, we should be motivated to share the good news of Jesus Christ with that person and be praying for their salvation.

Heaven is the great hope for all who know Jesus Christ. To make this hope a reality, one must receive Jesus as your Lord and Savior.

Conclusion

The good news is that an eternal relationship with God is made possible to all men and women who receive Jesus Christ as their Lord and savior. God is holy and we are separated from God because of our sin. We all have chosen to turn from God and disobey His commands. This is sin and as a result, a just and holy God must judge our sin. Fortunately, God's son, Jesus Christ paid the price for our sin and took upon Himself the judgment of God on the cross. Jesus paid the price for our sin so that by receiving the gift of his death and resurrection, we can know that we have an eternal relationship with God.

John writes, "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life." The joy and promise of heaven can be known today when you receive the gift of Jesus Christ.

³ C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, (New York: Macmillan 1946), 124.