

# Questions & Answers about Heaven

*by Randy Alcorn*

## **What are our misconceptions about heaven?**

I heard a pastor make a startling confession: "Whenever I think about heaven, it makes me depressed. I'd rather just cease to exist when I die."

I tried not to show my shock as I asked him, "Why?"

"I can't stand the thought of that endless tedium. To float around in the clouds with nothing to do but strum a harp...it's all so terribly boring. Heaven doesn't sound much better than hell. I'd rather be annihilated than spend eternity in a place like that."

Where did this Bible-believing, seminary-educated pastor get such a view of heaven? Certainly not from Scripture, where Paul said to depart and be with Christ was "far better" than staying on earth (Phil. 1:23). And yet, though my friend was more honest about it than most, I've found many Christians share the same misconceptions about heaven. I am often told by readers of my books that though they are Christians they have never looked forward to heaven, but have thought of it as a distant, boring, and even frightening place.

## **Where do we get our misconceptions about heaven?**

Satan labors to give people an inaccurate view of heaven. Jesus said of the devil, "When he lies he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). Some of Satan's favorite lies are about heaven. Revelation 13:6 tells us the satanic beast "opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven." Our enemy slanders three things: God's person, God's people, and God's place-heaven. Satan accomplishes his purposes not only by attacking God and us, but by attacking our view of heaven. The forces of darkness have vested interests in conveying false and unbiblical concepts of what heaven is.

After being forcibly evicted from heaven (Isaiah 14:12-14), the devil is bitter not only toward God, but toward us and the place that's no longer his. (It must be maddening for him to realize we're now entitled to the home he was kicked out of.) What better way for demons to attack than to whisper lies about the very place God tells us to set our hearts and minds on (Colossians 3:1-2)?

Paul warned us to be aware of the devil's schemes (2 Corinthians 2:11) and put on God's armor to stand against them (Ephesians 6:11). One of Satan's favorite tactics is feeding us a distorted view of heaven. He knows this will rob us of joy in anticipating being with our bridegroom. It will make us fall in love with this world, as if it were our home. It will take away our motivation to tell others about Jesus. (Why tell someone a message about how to go to heaven when you think it's going to be a dull, boring, and tedious place to be?)

For this reason it's good to pray for God to enlighten our minds and break through the devil's lies as we look at what his Word says about heaven.

## **Is heaven a real place, a tangible reality?**

Heaven is an actual place, in an actual location, designed by God with people in mind.

Beings have traveled to and from heaven, including Christ (John 1:32; 6:33; Acts 1:2), angels (Matt. 28:2; Rev. 10:1), and humans (2 Cor. 12:2; Rev. 11:12).

Jesus, speaking as the bridegroom to his beloved bride, said to us, "I go to prepare a place for you, that where I am you may be also." Heaven is that place.

The New Earth, where the heavenly city will be brought down to and relocated, will be a vastly improved form of the present earth and will have much in common with it-light, water, trees and fruit (Rev. 21:1-2), people and animals (Rev. 6:2-8; 19:11).

As a new car is a better version of an old car-but with the same essential components that make a car a car (four wheels, engine, transmission, steering wheel, etc.)-the New Earth will be a far better version of the old earth but with the same essential components. Heaven will exist within the realm of the New Earth and will therefore be very earthly in its properties. Since it is not only the dwelling place of God, but it is fashioned by God to be populated by people, the present heaven is also people-friendly, designed with their God-given desires and interests in mind.

## **Are we really supposed to think about heaven?**

When Jesus said to us, "I am going there [to heaven] to prepare a place for you...I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (John 14:2&3), he spoke as a groom to his bride-to-be. These are words of love and romance. How would any bride who loves her husband-to-be respond to them? She'd be thrilled. Not a single day would go by, not a single *hour*, in which the bride wouldn't anticipate joining her beloved in that place he prepared for her to live with him forever.

Like a bride's dreams of sharing a home with her groom, our love for heaven should be overflowing and contagious, just like our love for God. Our passion for God and our passion for heaven should be inseparable. The more I learn about God, the more excited I get about heaven. The more I learn about heaven, the more excited I get about God.

## **What is Heaven Like?**

Heaven is both a country (Luke 19:12; Heb. 11:14-16) and a city (Heb. 11:16; 12:22; 13:14; Rev. 21:12). A country is typically a large territory of various geographies, with citizens of diverse cultures and vocations, sometimes even languages, under one government that provides a common identity. A city is a place of many residences in near proximity. A city's inhabitants are subject to the common government. Cities usually have varied and bustling activity, community events, education, arts, and visitors.

Heaven is and will be a place of great beauty, both natural created beauty and architecture, including streets of gold and buildings of pearls and emeralds and precious stones (Rev. 21:19-21). Heaven will have the advantages we associate with earthly cities, without the disadvantages (e.g. Crime, pollution, corruption).

Heaven's gates are always open. People will travel in and out, some bringing treasures into the city (Rev. 21:24-25; 22:14). Travel outside the city shows that the city is not the whole of heaven, but merely its center. The great city is the capital of an endless empire, called a heavenly country (Heb. 11:16). There is a universe outside the city's gates, to which its citizens have free access. Cities are characterized by visitors coming in and occupants going out for various reasons.

What will we do in heaven?

Rest from our labors on earth (Rev. 14:13). Heaven's labor will be refreshing, productive and unthwarted, without futility and frustration. Perhaps it will be like the work Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:15), before sin brought the curse on the ground, with its thorns (Gen. 3:17-19). Our work will be more purposeful in light of Christ's redemptive work and the glory it will have brought.

Eat and drink and celebrate at the table with Christ and the redeemed saints from earth, communicating and fellowshiping and storytelling and rejoicing with them (Matt. 8:11; Luke 22:29, 30; Rev. 19:9). Communication, dialogue, corporate worship, and other relationship-building interactions all take place in heaven (Rev. 1-22). Saints and angels and God himself will interact together, building and deepening their relationships.

Worship God (Rev. 5:13-14; 7:9-12). Multitudes of God's people, of every nation, tribe, people, and language, will gather to sing praise to God for his greatness, wisdom, power, grace, and mighty work of redemption.

Will heaven be an eternal naptime or vacation? Or will we have activities and responsibilities?

In heaven we will serve God (Rev. 7:15). Service is not passive, but active. It involves fulfilling responsibilities, carrying out duties, expending effort, and having energy and creativity to do work well. (This will be work with lasting accomplishment, unhindered by decay and fatigue, and enhanced by unlimited resources.)

In heaven we will exercise leadership and authority, making important decisions. We will reign with Christ in heaven (2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 3:21; 22:5). This implies specific delegated responsibilities for those under our leadership (Luke 19:17-19). We judge or rule over the world *and* we judge and rule over angels (1 Cor. 6:2-3).

The concept of endlessly floating on clouds doing nothing but singing or strumming a harp is not rooted in Scripture.

Who will be in heaven?

While there may be others we don't know of who God has created or will create in the future, we know the following will be in heaven: God himself (Deut. 26:15; Matt. 6:9); all God's people-covered by Christ's blood-from earth who have died (Rev. 4-5; Luke 16:22, 25; Heb. 12:23); righteous angels (Luke 2:15; Matt. 28:2; Heb. 12:22).

Will there be animals in heaven?

Elijah was taken up to heaven in a chariot pulled by horses (2 Kings 2:11). We're told there are horses in heaven (Revelation 6:2-8; 19:11). In fact, there are lots of horses, enough for the vast armies of heaven to ride (Revelation 19:11; 2 Kings 6:17).

Other animals aren't mentioned in the Revelation passages, presumably because they don't play a role in Christ's second coming (an army bringing deliverance rides horses, not Dalmatians or hedgehogs). But isn't it likely that since there are innumerable horses in heaven there are all kinds of other animals too? Why *wouldn't* there be? Why would we expect horses to be the only animals? If there were no other animals, there wouldn't be horses.

In Isaiah 65:17 God refers to creating a New Heavens and a New Earth. In subsequent verses the text seems to move back and forth from the millennial kingdom to the New Earth. God makes clear he will have animals living there-either in the millennium or the New Earth or both (Isaiah 65:25).

Some also argue for animals being in heaven based on Ecclesiastes 3:19-21, which says "Man's fate is like that of the animals...all go to the same place." However, in the larger context of Ecclesiastes Solomon is simply talking about the outward appearance of death. Men and animals both die and we can't see where they go. Scripture tells us elsewhere, however, that man has an eternal soul. It tells us he goes one of two places at death. Animals are not said to have eternal souls. They are not said to relocate when they die. The presumption would be that at death they cease to exist.

However, this doesn't mean beloved animals won't be in heaven. I once read Billy Graham's response to a little girl's question, "Will my dog who died this week be in heaven?" Graham replied, "If it would make you any happier, then yes, he will be." Animals aren't nearly as valuable as people, but God is their maker and has touched many people's lives through them. It would be simple for Him to recreate a pet in heaven. I see no reason to believe he wouldn't if it would bring his children pleasure.

Romans 8:18-22 says that the whole creation was subject to suffering and futility because of human sin. The creation groans in longing for the liberation that will come to humans, and thereby to all creation itself. Creation is under man's dominion and will share the rewards of his redemption just as it shared the punishment for his sin. Animals are a central part of that creation, next to man himself the most significant part. After all, besides his wife, Adam was called upon to give names only to one other part of the creation—the animals (Genesis 2:19-20). He worked the garden, but he wasn't invited to name the vegetation. Clearly, the animals had certain qualities that set them above other creation. They were to be special to man, and his naming them makes his connection with them personal.

If the New Earth is all the best of the old earth and more, then we should expect it to contain animals. If animals weren't part of the New Earth, this would seem an obvious oversight. Eden was ruined through sin and will be restored through Christ's reign of righteousness. All that was part of Eden, and then made wrong through the sin of the first Adam, we would expect to be part of the New Earth, made right through the virtue of the Second Adam.

Would God take away from us in heaven what he gave, for delight and companionship and help, to Adam and Eve in Eden? Would he revoke his earlier decision to put animals with man, and under man's care? If he remakes the New Earth with new men (who look very much like the old men, only perfect), wouldn't we expect him also to make new animals (who will presumably look like the old animals, only perfect)?

Do we go to heaven (or hell) immediately or do we sleep until the resurrection?

At death, the human spirit leaves the body (Ec. 12:7) and goes either to heaven or hell (Luke 16:22ff). There is immediate conscious existence after death, both in heaven and hell (Luke 16:22ff.; Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 5:8; Rev. 6:9-11; Phil. 1:23). There is no "soul sleep" or period of unawareness preceding heaven. Some Old Testament passages do not reflect the fullness of New Testament revelation concerning immediate consciousness upon death. "Fallen asleep" in 1 Thes. 4:13 and similar passages is a euphemism for death, describing the spirit's departure from the body, ending our conscious existence on earth. This "sleep" refers to the outward inanimate appearance of the body that is buried in the earth. The physical part of us "sleeps" until the resurrection, while the spiritual part of us relocates to a conscious existence in heaven (Dan. 12:2-3; 2 Cor. 5:8; Rev. 6:9-11). Every reference in Revelation to human beings talking and worshipping in heaven prior to the resurrection (Rev. 20) refutes the notion of soul sleep.

### **Will we become angels when we go to heaven?**

No. Angels and human beings are entirely different creatures (Heb. 2:14). Jesus said after our resurrections we will be like angels in that we will not be married (Matt. 22:30). But this was a specific limited comparison. It wasn't an indication we'll become angels, or a statement that we will in general be angel-like. Angels will

always be angels and people will always be people. Humans are eternally human. Death involves relocation to a different place and transformation into better humans (Rom. 8:23), not into nonhumans.

### **In heaven, will we be disembodied spirits floating in the clouds, or will we have bodies?**

Eventually all believers will have resurrection bodies (Job 19:25-27; Is. 26:19; Dan. 12:2-3; 1 Cor. 15:12-58; Phil. 3:21; 1 Thess. 4:16-17; Rev. 20:4-6). Jesus had a physical resurrection body which allowed him to walk, talk, and eat (John 21:1-14). We're told his body is the prototype, and our bodies will be like his (1 Cor. 15:20, 48-49; Phil. 3:21; 1 John 3:2). After his resurrection, Jesus invited the disciples to touch him and said, "A ghost [disembodied spirit] does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have" (Luke 24:37-39).

Jesus was not recognized at first on a few occasions (John 20:15; Luke 24:15-16), suggesting some change in appearance. After being with him awhile, his disciples suddenly recognized him (John 20:16; Luke 24:31). This suggests that despite any outer appearance change, the inner identity of the person may shine through, especially to eyes enlightened by heaven.

We will have real "spiritual" bodies with physical substance (1 Cor. 15:42-44). We will be capable of talking, walking, touching, and being touched (Luke 24; John 20-21). Christ's resurrection body had an ability to appear suddenly, apparently coming through a locked door to the apostles (John 20:19), and "disappearing" from the sight of the two at Emmaus (Luke 24:31). If our resurrection bodies have the same properties as his, this suggests an ability to transcend the present laws of physics and/or to move and travel in some way we are now incapable of.

Christ ate food in his resurrection body, and he and we will eat and drink in heaven (Luke 14:15; 22:18). Yet there will be no hunger or thirst in heaven (Rev. 7:16). It would seem the resurrection body does not need what is now essential—food, drink, oxygen, covering, etc.—but that it is nonetheless fully capable of enjoying some or all of these things (and no doubt many more).

### **After death but prior to the resurrection, what will we be like?**

Between our entrance to heaven and our resurrection, we *may* have temporary pre-resurrection bodies (Luke 16:19ff.; Rev. 6:11). Unlike God and the angels, who are in essence spirits though capable of inhabiting bodies (John 4:24; Heb. 1:14), man is in essence both spiritual *and* physical (Gen. 2:7). Hence, between our earthly life and our resurrection, a temporary body would allow us to retain full human qualities. (If true, this in no way minimizes the ultimate necessity or critical importance of the resurrection.)

### **What will our arrival in heaven be like?**

At their deaths, believers may be carried by angels to heaven, as Lazarus was (Luke 16:22). These angels could include one or more who have served and protected us while we were on earth (Heb. 1:14). Some angels are specifically assigned to children and likely accompany them to heaven (Matt. 18:10).

We will meet our Lord face to face (Ps. 17:15; 1 John 3:2; Rev. 22:4). Those who have served him faithfully will hear him say, "Well done" (Mt. 25:21; Luke 19:17). Eventually he will wipe away the tears from all of our eyes (Rev. 21:4).

Some believers will receive a "rich welcome" when they enter heaven (2 Pet. 1:11). It seems likely those who on earth have impacted or been impacted by the arriving believer (perhaps including family members), and who have gone to heaven before him, may participate in the welcoming celebration.

### **In what sense will believers be judged in heaven?**

All believers will be judged in heaven. All righteous acts-many of which will have been disregarded and some punished on earth-will be finally rewarded. All believers will stand before the "Bema seat," the judgment seat of Christ. The result of this judgment will be the gain or loss of eternal rewards (1 Cor. 3:12-15; 2 Cor. 5:9,10; Rom. 14:10-12). These are sometimes depicted as crowns (James 1:12; Rev. 2:10; 1 Cor. 9:24-25; 1 Pet. 5:1-4; 2 Tim. 4:6-8; 1 Thess. 2:19). These represent positions of leadership and service for Christ in his kingdom (Matthew 25:21; Luke 19:17; Rev. 20:6).

The Bible treats this judgment of believers with great sobriety. It is not a meaningless formality, but a monumental event in which things of eternal consequence are put into effect. Jesus says to Christians, "I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds" (Rev. 2:23). He said, "I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward" (Mark 9:41).

There's a "proper time" for the harvest, a time that normally follows our life on earth-"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:9). The Christian's works done for God's glory will have eternal significance-of those who die in Christ, God says "their deeds will follow them" (Rev. 14:13). Our rewards in heaven will link us eternally to our service for Christ on earth. There is a radical change in our location, but continuity between our lives here and there.

Heaven marks the beginning of eternal adventure, but the end of earth's window of opportunity. One moment after we die, we will know exactly how we should have lived. But there will be no more second chances. As there will be no opportunity for the unbeliever to go back to earth and live his life again and this time to put faith in Christ, so there will be no opportunity for the believer to go back and relive his life, this time for Christ. "Only one life Ôtwill soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last."

### **Will we know everything in heaven?**

In heaven, we'll see clearly (1 Cor. 13:12), but won't know everything. If we knew everything, we'd be God. To see clearly and to see with far greater understanding is one thing, to see omnisciently is another. God alone is Creator, we are mere creatures. Only God is omniscient; we are and always will be finite. The popular notion "we'll know everything in heaven" is therefore clearly wrong. When we go to heaven we become glorified humans, we don't become God. The angels in heaven don't know everything (Mark 13:32). Neither will we.

### **Will we continue to change, grow, and learn once we get to heaven?**

In keeping with our finite natures, we will experience *process* in heaven. We will continually learn more of God "in the coming ages" (Eph. 2:7). As angels, also finite, strive to grow in their understanding (1 Pet. 1:12), so presumably will we. As we learn more of God, it seems likely we will also learn more of other people, angels, and the wonders of God's creation.

The sense of wonder among heaven's inhabitants shows heaven not to be stagnant, but fresh and stimulating, suggesting an ever-deepening appreciation of God's greatness (Rev. 4-5). In heaven we'll always be learning and discovering.

### **Will time no longer exist in heaven?**

Whether or not heaven operates outside the scope of earth's time sequence, clearly the inhabitants of heaven track with events happening in time (Rev. 2-3; Luke 9:23). It is a hymn, not the Bible, which says "and time shall be no more." Revelation 8:1 speaks of "silence in heaven for about half an hour." Even the

presence of music in heaven implies some sort of time duration, since meter, tempo and rests, which are intrinsic to music, are all time-related.

2 Peter 3:8 says, "With the Lord [it does not say "with believers in heaven"] a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day." This is rooted in the fact of God's infinity-*He* exists outside of time and space, but there is no indication his creatures do.

Whether there is time in heaven or not, heaven seems to enter into the sequences on earth, right down to rejoicing over and anticipating specific events here (Luke 15:7; Rev. 6:9-11). The entire book of Revelation shows a continuous interaction of heaven with the sequential events happening on earth. This contradicts the notion that those in heaven are alienated from or disinterested in what happens on earth.

## **Once in heaven, will people know and recognize those they knew on earth?**

In heaven, we will know each other, including those we knew on earth. Here's some evidence:

1. Heaven will not reduce our mental capacities, but sharpen them (1 Cor. 13:12). We will not be dumber in heaven, but smarter. Scripture gives no indication of a "memory wipe" that will cause us not to recognize our loved ones and others we've known. If we wouldn't know our loved ones, the consolation of afterlife reunion in 1 Thes. 4:14-18 would be nonexistent.

2. After his resurrection, Jesus was not recognized at first on a few occasions (John 20:15; Luke 24:15-16), suggesting some change in appearance. After being with him awhile, his disciples suddenly recognized him (John 20:16; Luke 24:31). This suggests that despite any outer appearance change, the inner identity of the person may shine through, especially to eyes enlightened by heaven.

3. In Matt. 17:1-4, at the transfiguration, Moses and Elijah were recognized by the disciples, even though they weren't told who they were, and they couldn't have previously known what they looked like. This may suggest we could recognize instantly people we know *of* but have not previously met, perhaps as a result of individual personality emanating through their physical appearance.

4. Even apart from the direct indications of Scripture cited above and below, it would logically follow that we would know our loved ones in heaven. The nature of love itself is abiding in a way that transcends death (1 Cor. 13:13). While we will no doubt lose interest in and choose not to recall many things that attracted us on earth, the shared experience of loving relationships forges a camaraderie parallel to that of soldiers who have served together in the trenches, and who never forget what they experienced together in that foreign land.

## **In heaven, will we have our own places to live?**

Jesus described heaven as having many rooms or dwellings, and promised that he himself would go there and prepare a place for us (John 14:2-3). Like earthly cities or countries, heaven includes individual dwelling places: the plural "rooms", not just the singular "place." Heaven contains for believers a permanent inheritance, an unperishable estate specifically reserved for us (1 Pet. 1:4).

When we are in heaven, we will welcome others into our dwelling places. Jesus speaks of the shrewd servant's desire to use earthly resources so that "people will welcome me into their houses." Then Jesus tells his followers to use "worldly wealth" (earthly resources) to "gain friends" (by making a difference in their lives on earth), "so that when it is gone [when life on earth is over] you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings" (Luke 16:9). Our "friends" in heaven appear to be those who we've touched in a significant way on

earth. They will apparently have their own "eternal dwellings." Luke 16:9 suggests these eternal dwelling places of friends could be places to fellowship and stay in as we move about the heavenly kingdom.

### **Will there be privacy in heaven?**

The existence of our own individual dwelling places implies privacy. We are also told Christ will give new names to the righteous, known only between him and them (Rev. 2:17). This is a secret, a private knowledge shared only between the individual and God. While there will be no sin to confess, presumably we will still want to have a private audience with God. There is every reason to believe we will still have the ability to go directly to our Lord, to talk to him not just in corporate worship but in private prayer.

### **Will there be private ownership in heaven?**

One Christian author categorically states people won't own anything in heaven. He believes this will assure our equality.

But what about the different "dwelling places" believers will have in heaven (Luke 16:4,9)? What about the treasures Christ commanded us to store up "for ourselves" in heaven (Matt. 6:20)? What about the different crowns and rewards God will hand out according to our works (2 Cor. 5:10)? What about the fact that we have an "inheritance" that will be given us in heaven (Col. 3:24)? Doesn't the word "inheritance" mean something tangible that will belong to us?

Will one believer's crown be as much mine as it is his? Of course not. What about the white stone God promises to give to overcomers, with our new name written on it, a name no one else will know (Revelation 2:17)? Will you and I have equal possession of those stones or names? No. The one God gives you will be yours, not mine. The one he gives me-if I'm an overcomer-will be mine, not yours. Is this ownership wrong or selfish? Of course not. Ownership is never wrong when it's God distributing to us possessions he wants us to own!

Heaven is not a socialist utopia in which private ownership is evil. Materialism, greed, envy, and selfishness are sins-ownership is not.

Our different personalities, rewards, positions, and names in heaven not only speak of our individuality, but of how God, who loves us all, finds unique reasons to love us. I love my wife and daughters, but I love different things about each.

Of course, God is the ultimate owner of all things. He owns not only all of heaven, but everything on earth (Deut. 10:14; 1 Chron. 29:11-12), including the land (Lev. 25:23), the animals (Ps. 50:10-12), and all wealth in the possession of people (Hag. 2:8). He owns not only all things but all people (Ps. 24:1). He owns our very bodies (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

So what is "ours" is ultimately God's, including whatever he gives to us. But that is every bit as true here on earth as it is in heaven. And the fact that God owns whatever is "mine" does not mean there is no distinction between what I own and what others own. The early Christians generously regarded their possessions as not just for them, but for others, and shared them generously (Acts 2:44-45; Acts 4:32-35). But this did not negate private ownership. Peter told Ananias that his property belonged to him before he sold it, and the money belonged to him after he sold it (Acts 5:4). His sin was in claiming to give to God and others what he secretly kept. While in heaven we will no doubt delight in sharing our treasures with others, they will still be our treasures, generously given to us by God.

### **Do people in heaven remember what happened on earth?**



In heaven, we will recall some-likely most or all-of our lives on earth. This is among the most controversial beliefs i've presented in my books, yet there's clear scriptural evidence for it:

1. The martyrs in heaven clearly remember at least some of what happened on earth, including that they underwent great suffering (Rev. 6:9-11). They anticipate and look forward with strong emotion to God's coming judgment.

This shows we are incorrect in assuming remembrance of unpleasant things on earth would automatically be impossible in heaven. The change in our perspective will presumably negate any need for loss of memory.

2. In heaven, those who endured bad things on earth are comforted for them (Luke 16:25). The comfort implies memory of what happened. If there was no memory of the bad things, what would be the need for, purpose of, or nature of the comfort concerning them?

3. We will give an account of our lives on earth, down to specific actions and words (2 Cor. 5:10; Matt. 12:36). Given our improved minds and clear thinking, our memories should be more, not less acute as to our past lives on earth. Certainly, we must remember the things we will give an account of.

4. The entire reality of eternal rewards points to specific acts of faithfulness done on earth that survive the believer's judgment and are brought into heaven with us (1 Cor. 3:14). We are told that in heaven the Bride of Christ's wedding dress stands for "the righteous acts of the saints" done on earth (Rev. 19:7-8). Our righteous deeds on earth will not be forgotten but will "follow" us to heaven (Rev. 14:13). The ruling positions and treasures in heaven granted to the faithful will perpetually remind heaven's inhabitants, including us, of our lives on earth, since that is what the rewards come in direct response to (Matt. 6:19-21; Matt. 19:21; Luke 12:33; 1 Tim. 6:19; Luke 19:17,19; Rev. 2:26-28).

5. God makes a record in heaven of what is done by people on earth, both nonbelievers (Rev. 20:11-13) and believers (2 Cor. 5:10). We know that record outlasts life on earth in all cases, for the believer at least to the judgment seat of Christ, and for the unbeliever, right up to the Great White Throne, just preceding the New Heavens and New Earth. Whether it lasts beyond these points we don't know, but for those now in heaven these records of life on earth still exist.

6. Malachi 3:16 says "a scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honored his name." Typically, such documents were made by the King's scribes (in heaven's case, perhaps angels), and periodically read in the King's presence, to assure worthy actions done by his subjects were remembered, and had been properly rewarded (Esther 6:1-11). The purpose of such a scroll was to keep a permanent record so that the memory of acts done to the King's glory would endure. We are told that such a scroll exists in heaven. Do we envision the God of history destroying it, or in ages to come no one in heaven making reference to it? It seems more likely that such records of the faithful works of God's people on earth will not be destroyed or set aside, but may even be read and rejoiced over in heaven before God, men, and angels.

7. Memory is a basic element of personality. If it is truly *us* in heaven, there must be some continuity of memory from earth to heaven. We are not different people, but the same people marvelously relocated and transformed. Heaven cleanses our slate of sin and error, but does not erase it. The lessons we learned here about God's love and grace and justice surely are not lost, but carry over to heaven. They are built upon and greatly expanded, yes, but not eliminated. There seems every reason to believe that just as our earthly works done for Christ will survive this life and be brought into the next (1 Cor. 3:14), so will our Christ-centered experiences.

We tend to dismiss our lives on earth assuming that once in heaven it will be as if they never happened. This is nowhere taught in Scripture. For some reason (wishful thinking may be part of it), we disassociate our

lives on earth from the life to come. God, however, sees a direct connection between them. At death we are relocated, but this does not relegate our earthly lives to insignificance. On the contrary, they have *eternal* significance. They have been recorded in the sight of all heaven, and serve as an ongoing reference point, a point of reference for eternal rewards.

Since none of us learns everything on earth that God would desire us to, rather than abandon the lessons he wanted to teach us, he might allow us once in heaven to review our lives on earth and this time learn everything he intended. This is speculation, but that there will be ongoing remembrance in heaven of some aspects of our lives on earth is not speculation. It's a clear teaching of Scripture.

## **Do people in heaven know what's presently happening on earth?**

The answer is *yes*, at least to a certain degree:

1. The martyrs in heaven appear to know what is still happening on earth (Rev. 6:9-11).
2. When Babylon is brought down, an angel points to events happening on earth and says, "Rejoice over her, O heaven! Rejoice, saints and apostles and prophets! God has judged her for the way she treated you" (Rev. 18:20). Since he specifically addresses them, the clear implication is that the saints in heaven are watching and listening to what is happening on earth.
3. There is "the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting Hallelujah" and praising God for specific events of judgment that have just taken place on earth (Rev. 19:1-5). Again, the saints in heaven are clearly observing what is happening on earth.
4. When heaven's saints return with Christ to set up his millennial kingdom (Rev. 19:11-14), it seems strange to think they would have been ignorant of the culmination of human history taking place on earth. The picture of saints in heaven blissfully unaware of what is transpiring on earth, where God and his angels (and they themselves) are about to return for the ultimate battle in the history of the universe, after which Christ will be crowned king, contradicts clear indications in the context. But even apart from such indications, this notion of heavenly ignorance seems ludicrous.
5. When brought back to earth from heaven (in a surprise move done by God when the witch of Endor and Saul wrongly called upon Samuel's spirit to visit them), Samuel was aware of what Saul had been doing and what he'd failed to do on earth (1 Sam. 28:18). Unless he was specially "briefed" on this, it follows he must have been already aware of it.
6. When called from heaven to the transfiguration on earth, Moses and Elijah talked with Jesus about his death about to happen in Jerusalem (Luke 9:31). They seemed fully aware of the context they stepped into, of what was currently transpiring on earth. (And clearly, they would go back to heaven remembering what they'd discussed with their Creator and Savior.)
7. Hebrews 12:1 tells us to "run the race marked out for us," creating the mental picture of the Greek competitions which were watched intently by throngs of engrossed fans, sitting high up in the ancient stadiums. The "great cloud of witnesses" he speaks of are clearly the saints who've gone before us, whose accomplishments (some of them recorded in the previous chapter) on the playing field are now past. The imagery seems to suggest those saints, the spiritual "athletes" of old, are now watching us and cheering us on from the stands of heaven. (The witnesses are said to "surround" us, not merely to have preceded us.)
8. The unfolding drama of redemption, awaiting Christ's return, is currently happening on earth. Earth is center court, center stage, awaiting the consummation of Christ's return and the setting up of his kingdom.

Logically, this seems a compelling reason to think those in heaven might see what is happening on earth. If in heaven we will be concerned with what God is concerned with, and his focus is on the spiritual battle on earth, why would we *not* witness his works there?

9. Christ, in heaven, watches closely what transpires on earth, especially in the lives of God's people (Rev. 2-3). If the Sovereign God's attentions are on earth, why wouldn't those of his heavenly subjects be? When a great war is transpiring, is anyone in the home country uninformed and unaware of it? When a great drama is taking place, do those who know the writer, producer, and cast-and have great interest in the outcome-refrain from watching?

10. Angels saw Christ on earth (1 Tim. 3:16). There are clear indications angels know what is happening on earth (Luke 1:26; 1 Cor. 11:10). If angels, why not saints? Don't the people of God in heaven have as much vested interest in the spiritual events happening on earth as angels do? Wouldn't the body and bride of Christ in heaven be expected to be intensely interested about the rest of the body and bride of Christ now living on earth?

11. Abraham and Lazarus saw the rich man's agonies in hell (Luke 16:23-26). If it is possible, at least in some cases, to see hell from heaven, why would people be unable to see earth from heaven?

12. Christ said, "There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine who do not need to" (Luke 15:7). Similarly, "there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10). Who is doing this rejoicing in heaven, in the presence of angels? Doesn't it logically include the saints in heaven, who would most appreciate the joy and wonder of human conversion? (If they rejoice over conversions happening on earth, then obviously they must be aware of what is happening on earth.)

## **Do people in heaven pray for those on earth?**

Based on the Scriptural evidence I see, I believe the answer is "yes."

1. Christ, the God-man, is in heaven interceding for people on earth (Rom. 8:34). In at least one case, then, a person who has died and gone to heaven is now praying for those on earth. The martyrs in heaven in Rev. 6:10 pray to God, asking him to take specific action on earth. They are praying for God's justice on the earth, which may have intercessory implications for their brethren now suffering on earth. The sense of connection and loyalty to and concern for the body of Christ of which saints in heaven are part with the saints on earth, would likely be enhanced by being in heaven, not eliminated by it (Eph. 3:15). In any case, we know these are saints who have died, now in God's presence, actively praying concerning what is happening on earth.

2. Prayer is simply talking to God. Angels can talk to God, and therefore angels pray. We will communicate with God in heaven, and therefore we will pray in heaven, presumably more than we do now, not less. Our prayers will be effective given our righteous state (James 5:16).

3. The burden of proof lies on those who would argue saints in heaven cannot or do not pray for those on earth. On what biblical basis would we conclude this?

4. Rev. 5:8 speaks of the "prayers of the saints" in a context that may include saints in heaven, not just on earth. In any case, if saints are allowed to see some of what transpires on earth, and clearly they are, then it would seem strange for them *not* to intercede for them. (While we are not told angels pray for people, neither are we told they do not.)

5. It's a question of assumptions. If we assume heaven is a place of ignorance of or disinterest in earth, then we will naturally assume those in heaven couldn't or wouldn't pray for people here. In contrast, if we believe it is a place of interest in and observation of God's program and people on earth, and where the saints and angels talk to God, then we would naturally assume they *do* pray to God for those on earth. This is my assumption.

6. Given the substantial evidence of Scripture to the contrary, the burden of proof is on those who argue people in heaven are unconcerned with and unaware of what is happening on earth. Does Scripture really teach this? Where? Or is the belief that those in heaven are unaware of what happens on earth merely an assumption, one that over decades or centuries has been elevated by some into a doctrine, one not based on Scripture? I believe it is no more than a deduction based on a faulty premise, namely that for heaven to be happy, people in heaven can't know what's happening on earth. That argument is therefore worth taking a closer look at.

"But we're promised there won't be crying or pain in heaven. How could we be aware of bad things on earth? Surely it couldn't be heaven for us if we knew these things."

I believe this argument is invalid for the following reasons:

1. It's heaven for God and he knows exactly what's happening on earth.
2. It's heaven for the angels and they know what's happening on earth.
3. Angels in heaven see the torment of hell, but it does not minimize heaven (Rev. 14:10).
4. Abraham and Lazarus saw the rich man's agonies in hell, but it did not cause heaven to cease to be heaven (Luke 16:23-26). If one can see people in hell without ruining heaven, surely nothing he could see on earth could ruin it.

(Note: Luke 16 is in the intermediate state, before the end of the world and the resurrection. It does not therefore necessarily indicate those in the New Heavens and earth can see into the eternal lake of fire. However, it suggests those currently in heaven may be able to see into hell, or at the very least be fully aware of its existence.)

5. Luke 16 shows a chasm those in heaven and hell can't cross, but they can still see what is happening in the other place (Luke 16:23-26). If this is true of heaven and hell, is the same true of heaven and earth? Is there a chasm separating them and preventing direct intervention, yet an ability to see what's happening in the other world?

6. The promise of no more tears or crying is *after* the end of the world, after the Great White Throne judgment, after "the old order of things has passed away" and there's no more suffering on earth (Rev. 21:1-4). This passage is not a valid argument for tearlessness in the present heaven, but only in the New Heaven and earth. This doesn't mean those presently in heaven must be unaware of what's happening on earth.

Certainly those in heaven are not frail beings whose joy can be maintained only by sheer ignorance of what is going on in the universe. In fact, even if our knowledge did produce some sadness in heaven (we don't know for sure it would), the old order hasn't yet passed away. Heaven is not in its final state. We should not begin by defining heaven as "no sorrow, no concern, no knowledge of suffering" and then dismiss any scriptural indications that undermine that assumption.

Christ grieved for people on earth (Matt. 23:37-39; John 11:33-36). Is he no longer capable of doing so because he is in heaven? Or does he still hurt for his people when they suffer? If he can hurt for them, could not we? It is one thing to no longer cry because there is nothing left to cry about. It is something else to no longer cry when there is ongoing suffering on earth.

Going into the presence of Christ surely does not make us less compassionate, but more. Hence, it is possible that even with the predominant joy presently in heaven, in light of the fact there is still so much evil and pain in the universe, there could be periodic expressions of sadness in heaven until the evil and pain is permanently gone.

7. Since God is continuously at work on earth, observing saints would have a great deal to praise him for, including people's spiritual transformations (Luke 15:7,10). If there is rejoicing in heaven about what happens on earth, aren't the redeemed allowed to participate in the rejoicing? How *could* they participate unless aware of the cause for celebration?

Conclusion: Happiness in heaven is based not on ignorance, but on perspective. We will be with Christ, see accurately, and live in a sinless environment. Heavenly happiness cannot be based on a fundamental ignorance of what is happening on earth or even in hell.

But what about Isaiah 65:17, which says in heaven "the former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind"?

First, Isaiah 65:17 must be weighed against the dozens of other passages of Scripture previously cited in this article and the earlier one. If they clearly teach some things from earth will be remembered in the eternal state, then properly understood this verse does not contradict them.

Furthermore, whatever this verse means, it specifically comes *after* the New Heavens and New Earth, not before. Hence, *it has no bearing at all on the question of whether saints presently in heaven can witness events happening on earth.*

Isaiah 65:17 is linked to the previous verse: "For the past troubles will be forgotten and hidden from My eyes." This does not suggest literal lack of memory, as if the omniscient God couldn't recall the past. God knows everything. Rather, it is like God saying, "I will remember their sins no more" (Jer. 31:34). It means he will choose not to call to mind or to hold against us our past sins.

In eternity, past sins will not plague us or God, nor interfere with God's acceptance of us. Likewise, both God and we will be capable of choosing not to recall our past troubles and sorrows and sins in a way that would diminish the wonders of heaven. However, it seems likely that recalling the reality of such troubles and sorrows and sins would set a sharp contrast to the glories of heaven, as darkness does to light, as hell does to heaven. This contrast would be lost if the sense of what sorrow is was entirely forgotten. (If we ever forget we were desperate sinners, how could we appreciate the depth and meaning of Christ's glorious work for us?) It is even possible that an awareness of the perfect justice of hell will enhance the depth of gratitude to God of those in heaven.

Even in the New Heavens and earth there are memorials to the twelve tribes and the apostles (Rev. 21:12-14). Christ's nail-scarred hands and feet in his eternal resurrection body (John 20:24-29) prove his suffering and redemption-and the fact it was necessitated by

our sins-will *not* be forgotten! Hence, these passages clearly preclude the "we'll remember nothing on earth" understanding of Isaiah 65:17.

Every believer's crowns and rewards will continuously remind us of acts of faithfulness to God done in that window of opportunity on earth.

While God will wipe away the tears and sorrow attached to this world, the drama of God's work in human history will *not* be erased from our minds. Heaven's happiness will not be dependent on our ignorance of what really happened on earth. Rather, it will be greatly enhanced by our informed appreciation of God's glorious grace and justice in what really happened on earth.

### **What will hell be like?**

1. Jesus spoke of Hell as a literal place, describing it in graphic terms (Matt. 10:28;13:40-42; Mark 9:43-44).
2. Hell is as literal as heaven (Psalm 11:4-6) and as eternal as heaven (Matthew 25:46).
3. Hell is a place of punishment designed for Satan and the fallen angels (Matthew 25:41-46; Rev. 20:10)
4. Hell will also be inhabited by people who do not accept God's gift of the Savior (Revelation 20:12-15).
5. Hell is a horrible place of suffering and everlasting destruction (Matthew 13:41,42; 2 Thessalonians 1:9).
6. In Hell people are conscious, full of regret, and retain all their capacities and desires with no hope for any fulfillment for all eternity (Luke 16:22-31).
7. Because God is just, Hell will not be the same for everyone. Unsaved people-everyone whose name is not written in the Lamb's Book of Life-will be judged by God in relation to the works they have done, which have been recorded in the books of heaven (Rev. 20:12-15). The severity of punishment will vary with the amount of truth known and the nature and number of the sins committed (Matt. 11:20-24; Luke 20:45-47, Rom. 2:3-5).

### **Why don't we think more about heaven?**

"If there be so certain and glorious a rest for the saints, why is there no more industrious seeking after it? One would think, if a man did but once hear of such unspeakable glory to be obtained, and believed what he heard to be true, he should be transported with the vehemency of his desire after it, and should almost forget to eat and drink, and should care for nothing else, and speak of and inquire after nothing else, but how to get this treasure. And yet people who hear of it daily, and profess to believe it as a fundamental article of their faith, do as little mind it, or labour for it, as if they had never heard of any such thing, or did not believe one word they hear." *Richard Baxter, 1649*

"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God." *The Apostle Paul, Colossians 3:1*

"Let temporal things serve your use, but the eternal be the object of your desire." *Thomas a Kempis*

"It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this one." *William Wilberforce*

"It has been cited as a flaw in Christianity that it is more concerned with the world to come than with the world that now is, and some have been fluttering about trying to defend the faith of Christ against this accusation. Both the attack and the defense are wasted. No one who knows what the New Testament is about will worry over the charge that Christianity is other-worldly. Of course it is, and that is precisely where its power lies.

"Let no one apologize for the powerful emphasis Christianity lays upon the doctrine of the world to come. Right there lies its immense superiority to everything else within the whole sphere of human thought or experience. When Christ arose from death and ascended into heaven He established forever three important facts, namely, that this world has been condemned to ultimate dissolution, that the human spirit persists beyond the grave and that there is indeed a world to come.

"The church is constantly being tempted to accept this world as her home, and sometimes she has listened to those who would woo her away and use her for their own ends. But if she is wise she will consider that she stands in the valley between the mountain peaks of eternity past and eternity to come. The past is gone forever and the present is passing as swift as the shadow on the sun dial of Ahaz. Even if the earth should continue a million years not one of us could stay to enjoy it. We do well to think of the long tomorrow."

*A. W. Tozer*

## **Is heaven really worth getting excited about?**

In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, C. S. Lewis paints a beautiful picture of heaven in the final book, *The Last Battle*. The book begins with a near collision of a railroad train, where the children are thrust into Narnia. But when their adventure is over, the children are afraid they will be sent back to earth again.

Having experienced the joys and wonders of Narnia, and the presence of Aslan-the Lion who is in fact Christ-the thought of returning to earth was unbearable. Then, in the final section, called "Farewell to the Shadow Lands"), Aslan, the great Lion, gives the children some wonderful news:

"There was a real railway accident," said Aslan softly. "Your father and mother and all of you are, as you used to call it in the Shadowlands, dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning."

And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their

adventures in Narnia have only been the cover and the title page. Now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the great Story which no one on earth has read; which goes on for ever; in which every chapter is better than the one before.

C. S. LEWIS, *THE LAST BATTLE* (NEW YORK: MACMILLAN, 1956), 183-184

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