

THE DOCTRINE OF HEAVEN – PART 1

The Contemporary Fascination with Heaven

Heaven as an Adjective

- For most heaven is simply an adjective....A word synonymous with comfort, peace, contentment
- “This roast is heavenly....MBC is a little taste of heaven...The scenery in Washington is heavenly”
- We even have a ski resort in Utah called Heavenly and an Ice Cream named Heavenly Hash
- There have been movies: “Heaven” and “All Dogs go to Heaven – Part 1 & 2”
- There was a TV show called “7th Heaven”

Books on “Heaven Tourism” and “Near Death Experiences”

- There is an unprecedented fascination today with the afterlife
- There are books galore today for sale in the Christian bookstore by people who claim to have been to heaven or hell and have returned to tell about their experiences
- Others claim to have died, their soul left their body, they were taken to heaven, their body was restored to life so soul returned, and they write about their experience
- Books: *Heaven is for Real*, *90 Minutes in Heaven*, *Proof of Heaven*, *To Heaven and Back*, *Waking up in Heaven*, *Heaven is Real But so is Hell*

Some Common Misconceptions About Heaven

A Boring Place

- Far Side Cartoon: a man is in heaven sitting doing nothing on a cloud and saying “I wish I’d brought a magazine”
- Quote from a pastor: “Whenever I think about heaven it makes me depressed. I’d rather cease to exist when I die. I can’t stand the thought of endless boring tedium. Heaven doesn’t sound much better than hell. I’d rather be annihilated than spend an eternity like that”
- Huck Finn via Mark Twain: “The widow Douglass went on and told me all about the good place (heaven). She said all a body would have to do there was go around all day with a harp and sing, forever and ever. So I didn’t think much of it”
- Many have picked up a view of heaven that it’s boring and we’ll just be sitting on clouds playing harps

Someone’s Death Made Heaven Better

- Often we hear someone say that when grandma died, it made heaven better or that “God needed her now so He took her”
- This conveys the idea that something is lacking in heaven....Yet, heaven is heaven because Jesus is there!
- God doesn’t need anyone to be infinitely and gloriously happy

Soul Sleep

- In this view, the soul of a believer who dies remains unconscious until the resurrection
- This view is primarily held today by 7th Day Adventists
- They point out the fact that the word “sleep” is often used in Scripture as a synonym for death

John 11:11 ~ This He said, and after that He said to them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep.”

1 Thessalonians 4:14 ~ For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.

- But the “sleep” in these passages has to do with the body, not the soul...it is the body, not the soul that “sleeps” in death
- The body lies in the grave awaiting resurrection...but the soul enters the very presence of the Lord
- The souls of the departed enter into their rest, but it is a rest from labor and strife, not a rest of unconsciousness

Purgatory

- The Catholic Encyclopedia defines Purgatory as a “a place or condition of temporal punishment for those who, departing this life in God's grace, are not entirely free from venial faults, or have not fully paid the satisfaction due to their transgressions.”
- Thus, they believe that Purgatory is a place that a Christian’s soul goes to after death to be cleansed of the sins that had not been fully satisfied during life
- The length of suffering in Purgatory is determined by the person’s degree of sinfulness but this time of suffering can be shortened through the prayers and good works of the living (based on 2 Maccabees 12)
- It is understood to be a place of cleansing in preparation for heaven because they do not recognize that because of Jesus’ sacrifice, we are already cleansed, declared righteous, forgiven, redeemed, reconciled, and sanctified
- The primary Scriptural passage Catholics point to for evidence of Purgatory is 1 Corinthians 3:15, which says, “If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.”
- But, this passage does not say that believers pass through fire, but rather their works pass through fire and whatever remains becomes the basis for reward
- Furthermore, Purgatory is based on a misunderstanding of the nature and sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice
- His once-for-all sacrifice was absolutely and perfectly sufficient (Heb 7:27; 9:12)
- So, the very idea of Purgatory fails to recognize that Jesus’ death was sufficient to pay the penalty for ALL of our sins
- If we must in any sense pay for, atone for, or suffer because of our sins – that indicates Jesus’ death was not a perfect, complete, and sufficient sacrifice.
- Also, for believers to die is to be “away from the body and at home with the Lord (2 Cor 5:6-8; Phil 1:23) – this does not say “away from the body in Purgatory with cleansing fire”

Reasons for Studying Heaven

We are Commanded to Set Our Minds There

- There are many Biblical instructions and many examples of saints who have set their minds on heaven

- Paul told the Colossians in 3:2 ~ set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth
- That same Paul put into practice the things he told us to do: 2 Corinthians 4:16-17 ~ Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison,
- He said something similar in 2 Corinthians 5:1-3 ~ For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked.
- The thought of our eternal heaven was a very real and practical benefit to Paul and others
- Likewise, we should look forward to being absent from the body and present with the Lord
- We should become more preoccupied with the glories of eternity than we are with the afflictions of today

Unfamiliarity with heaven makes a dull and worldly Christian. God has graciously bid us sample the delights of the world to come, and it is only a rebellious and perverse mindset that keeps us mired in the mundane and worldly ~ John MacArthur, Heaven, 64

Heaven is our Home

- Philippians 3:20 ~ For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ
- Since it our final destination, it should captivate our affections

- Before our summer trip, we plan it extensively...we want to know where we are going and what we are going to see...we spend months researching the places we want to visit – campgrounds, hikes, sites to see
- We try to have our trip mapped out and a list of things we wanted to do in each destination
- We want to know as much as I can about our destination
- It's unthinkable that we would just hop in the car and have no idea about where we are going or what we are going to see there – can't imagine starting our trip without any preparation for our final destination

- The same thing should be true about our final destination of heaven – it should be unthinkable that we would not know much about where we will spend eternity... We should know as much as we can about our ultimate destination

It Brings Comfort Now

- Living with a heavenly perspective helps us discover life as God intended it here on earth and it gives hope in the present and for our future

- A friend was watching the movie Jurassic Park with their kids...young kids...and their kids were scared by some of the intense scenes in that movie
- Dinosaurs chasing people, dinosaurs eating people, people running terrified
- So wisely, the parents decided to skip to the end of the movie so the kids could see how it ends
- They fast forwarded it right to the end...all the people were alive...everyone was okay...not hurt...not eaten by T-Rex...not dangling out of dinosaur mouths
- The kids got to see how it ended...got to see that everything was okay...they knew how it ended
- They went back to the part where they had left off and finished watching the movie
- Kids were not afraid anymore because they knew how it ended

- Knowing how it all ends for us who know Christ should bring us great comfort and hope and joy!

A heavenly mind is a joyful mind; this is the nearest and truest way to live a life of comfort, and without this you must needs be uncomfortable. Can a man be at a fire and not be warm; or in the sunshine and not have light? Can your heart be in heaven, and not have comfort? [On the other hand], what could make such frozen, uncomfortable Christians but living so far as they do from heaven?...O Christian get above. Believe it, that region is warmer than this below.

Richard Baxter, *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*

Ways the Term “Heaven” is Used in the Bible

Atmospheric Heaven

- The term “heaven” is used in Scripture to describe the space surrounding the earth and extending to a height of about 6 miles (the troposphere).....the region of breathable air that blankets the earth
- This is the first heaven
- The birds fly here:

Genesis 1:20 ~ Then God said, “Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the heavens

- The clouds are in it:

Psalms 147:8 ~ Who covers the heavens with clouds

- Weather phenomena occur in it:

Deuteronomy 33:13 ~ Blessed of the LORD be his land, With the choice things of heaven, with the dew

Job 38:29 ~ From whose womb has come the ice? And the frost of heaven, who has given it birth?

Isaiah 55:10 ~ For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, And do not return there without watering the earth

Job 26:13 ~ By His breath (i.e. the wind) the heavens are cleared; His hand has pierced the fleeing serpent

1 Sam 2:10 ~ Those who contend with the LORD will be shattered; Against them He will thunder in the heavens

Celestial Heaven

- The term “heaven” is also used in Scripture to describe the realm of the sun, moon, stars, and planets
- This is the second heaven

Genesis 1:1 ~ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth

Genesis 1:14-17 ~ Then God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years and let them be for lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth”; and it was so. God made the two great lights, the greater light to govern the day, and the lesser light to govern the night; He made the stars also. God placed them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth

The Dwelling Place of God

- The term “heaven” can also refer to the place God’s presence dwells (“our Father who are in heaven ~ Matt 6:9)
- This heaven is probably what Paul referred to as the “third heaven” (2 Cor 12:2), also described as Paradise (2 Cor 12:4)...a place Paul was not permitted to speak about
- John was taken up to this heaven and given a glimpse of God’s dwelling place (Rev 4:1) but was permitted to speak about
- The other two heavens will pass away; but this heaven is eternal

- God sits enthroned in this heaven

Psalm 2:4 ~ He who sits in the heavens laughs, The Lord scoffs at them

- God renders judgment from this heaven

Genesis 19:24 ~ Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven

- God’s blessings come from heaven

Exodus 16:4 ~ Then the LORD said to Moses, “Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you

- From heaven God looks down upon his people

Deuteronomy 26:15 ~ Look down from Your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless Your people Israel,

- He hears their prayers from heaven

Psalm 20:6 ~ Now I know that the LORD saves His anointed; He will answer him from His holy heaven

- He comes down from heaven

Psalm 144:5 ~ Bow Your heavens, O LORD, and come down

- Thus, this third heaven is the place where God dwells with his holy angels and those saints who have died
- QUESTION – If God is omnipresent, how can Scripture say that “heaven” is place where God’s presence dwells....How can an omnipresent being be said to dwell anywhere?
- It is true that heaven cannot contain God...His omnipresent
- So, to say that God dwells in heaven is not to say that He is contained there
- But, heaven is uniquely God’s home....His center of operations...the place from which He conducts His will....the place His throne resides
- Heaven, then, is a place – the place where God dwells, the place where the elect will dwell with Him for all eternity, the heaven of heavens, the third heaven

Some Basic Principles About Heaven

It is a Real Place

- The descriptions of heaven contained in the Scriptures describe a very real place

- Just read the descriptions in Isaiah 6:1-4; Ezekiel 1:4-28; Revelation 4-5; Revelation 21-22
- Also consider Jesus description of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke 16
- But in saying that heaven is a real place is not to suggest that heaven is limited by the normal boundaries of time and space
- It is a real place that can be seen and touched and inhabited by being with material bodies
- But it is a realm not confined to an area defined by height, width, breadth
- Heaven spans all of those earthly dimensions and transcends the normal time-space continuum
- It is a realm that surpasses our finite concept of what a “place” is
- For example, in Rev 21:10, John describes “that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God
- Thus, the New Heaven and New Earth are seen blending together in a great kingdom that incorporates both realms
- The paradise of eternity is revealed as a magnificent kingdom where both heaven and earth unite in a glory that surpasses the limits of human imagination and the boundaries of earthly dimensions

It is a Glorious Place

- Scripture presents heaven as a place of breathtaking glory and dazzling beauty
- Read Ezekiel 1 and Revelation 4-5, 21-22
- These passages put the glory of heaven on display....it is a realm of inexpressible glory!

It is an Immediate Place

- Everything in Scripture indicates that believers enter heaven immediately upon their death
- This is true of OT saints

Psalm 16:10-11 ~ For You will not abandon my soul to Sheol; Nor will You allow Your Holy One to undergo decay. You will make known to me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; In Your right hand there are pleasures forever

Psalm 23:6 ~ Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever

Matthew 17:3 ~ And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him

Luke 16:22 ~ Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham’s bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried.

Luke 23:42-43 ~ And he was saying, “Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!” And He said to him, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.”

- This is also true of NT saints:

2 Corinthians 5:8 ~we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord

Philippians 1:21-23 ~ For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better

It is a Precious Place

- God is there

Matthew 6:9 ~ Pray, then, in this way: Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name

- Brothers and sisters in Christ are there

Hebrews 12:22-23 ~ But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect

- Our names are recorded there

Luke 10:20 ~ Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven

Revelation 3:5 ~ He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels

- Our citizenship is there

Philippians 3:20 ~ For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ