

What is heaven like?

By Dr. Jim Denison

When Ronald Reagan was running for Governor of California, a woman confronted him by his car one day and berated him severely. Finally she said, "I wouldn't vote for you if you were St. Peter." He smiled and replied, "No problem. If I were St. Peter, you wouldn't be living in my district."

What do we know about "St. Peter's district"? We're all fascinated with the subject. Last week we looked at hell, the place everyone wants to avoid; today let's discuss the place everyone wants to see. Each of us has loved ones there; I assume we all would like to spend eternity there ourselves. So let's ask the word of God to tell us about heaven. Then let's ask why our topic matters, why heaven is important for us on earth. I don't believe we can study a more motivating subject than this.

What is heaven?

What does God tell us about our eternal home? First, he tells us that heaven is *real*. It is certain--no figment of religious imagination, no superstition, no "opiate of the people" (to quote Karl Marx). He revealed it here to John: "I saw a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21:1). According to God himself, heaven is real.

Second, heaven is a *place* (Rev. 21:1-2). John "saw" it. He didn't feel it, or dream of it, or hear about it. He saw it, and we only see things which are. Heaven is a place.

Jesus said, "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a *place* for you" (John 14:2; emphasis mine). Where? "Up there"? Heaven is a place beyond our locating or understanding. Just as you couldn't dig down into the earth and find hell, so you can't rocket into the skies and find heaven. God is bigger, more awesome than that, and so is his heaven.

One of the Russian cosmonauts came back and said, "Some people say that God lives out there. I looked around, and I didn't see any God out there." Ruth Graham, Billy's wife, says he looked in the wrong place. If he'd stepped outside the space ship without his space suit, he would have seen God very quickly.

Third, heaven is *where God is* (Rev. 21:3). John reveals, "Now the dwelling of God is with men." When we get to heaven, we get to God. Psalm 11:4 is clear: "The Lord is in his holy temple; the Lord is on his heavenly throne." Jesus taught us to pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven" (Matthew 6:9). Heaven is a real place, where God is. It's being with God.

Fourth, heaven is a *blessed place* (Rev. 21:4). Because God is there, all that is perfect is there as well. There will be no death in heaven, thus no mourning or crying or pain. Our

greatest enemy will trouble us no more. Think of that—no death, ever! Eternity with God in his blessed home.

It's a place of incredible joy: "You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand" (Ps. 16:11). It's a place of reward: "Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Mt. 6:20). And this reward is eternal: "An inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade--kept in heaven for you" (1 Peter 1:4). Thus, heaven is a celebration, a party: "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God" (Luke 14:15).

We will reign in heaven: "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne" (Rev. 3:21). In heaven, we're royalty! We'll have perfect understanding there: "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Revelation 21 summarizes the blessedness of heaven: "I am making all things new" (v. 5). No more Fall, nor sin, or death, or disease, or disaster; no more earthquakes or tests or grades; no more. Everything new. No wonder Jesus called heaven "paradise" (Lk. 23:43). It is that, a place of blessing beyond all description: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what the Lord has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9; cf. Isaiah 64:4).

What will we be like?

First, let's set aside a popular misconception: in heaven, people are not angels. God created angels before he created us, and we are completely different. When Jesus said that people in heaven are "like the angels" (Lk. 20:36), he meant that we never die, like them. Not that we have wings and a halo. We are not angels.

But we do receive heavenly bodies: "The perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality" (1 Cor. 15:53). So, will we recognize each other? Will we know each other. Yes, for these reasons. Jesus said that in heaven we will take our places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Mt. 8:11); on the Mount of Transfiguration the disciples easily recognized Moses and Elijah (Mt. 17:3-4); we will "know as we are known" (1 Cor. 13:12).

I like what one preacher said: "We won't really know each other *until* we get to heaven!"

So, what is heaven? Most of all, it's home. A home of eternal blessing, reward, and bliss, better than the best earth can offer us. John Owen, the great Puritan, lay on his deathbed. His secretary wrote to a friend in his name, "I am still in the land of the living." Owen saw it and said, "Change that and say, 'I am yet in the land of the dying, but I hope soon to be in the land of the living.'" So can we all be.

Why does heaven matter?

Time magazine once published an extensive article entitled "Does heaven exist?" (*Time*, March 24, 1997). The writer documents three facts: preachers preach on heaven much less than in the past; while a large majority of people believe that it exists, most have no real idea what it is; and almost nobody thinks its existence changes the way we live here. Theologian David Wells is quoted as saying, "I don't think heaven is even a blip on the Christian screen, from one end of the denominational spectrum to the other."

How often did you think about heaven this week? Did its existence change anything you did? Why should it? For this simple reason: when we lose heaven we lose the transcendent. We lose our sense that there is something more than this world, and we who live in it. And that is always a bad decision, for several reasons.

First, if we don't live for heaven we will live for this world, for it is all there is. And that, the Bible says we must not do. Listen to 1 John 2:15-17: "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever."

Paul says, "We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18). He warns us: "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:1-3). The apostle summarizes for us: "Our citizenship is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20).

Why are we not to love this world? Because it is not enough. It is never enough. When an assistant asked a tycoon how much money is enough, he said: "Just a little more." Our new house seems wonderful, then they build others by us which are larger and better. Our new car is great, until the next model year arrives. Straight A's are super, but there's always the next semester. CEO is outstanding, but the more we succeed the more we must succeed to stay there.

If you don't live for heaven, you must live for earth. You trade eternity for something which could be gone today. And that's a mistake.

Second, if we don't live for heaven we must rely on ourselves, for God will not help us love this world. We are on our own.

Sociologist James Davison Hunter surveyed the titles released by the six largest evangelical publishers in America. He discovered that 87.5% of all books concerned self-help issues—pop psychology, how to's, self therapy. Only 12.5% dealt with God, theology, Scripture, or eternity. When we don't live for heaven, God cannot help us live on earth.

Third, if we don't live for heaven we lose any sense of direction, purpose or values. If this world is all there is, who is to say what's right and what's wrong? Everything becomes relative. And so it has.

Ninety three percent of all Americans say they are their only moral determiner. We must tolerate all beliefs as if they were our own. No absolutes exist—we're absolutely sure of it. In 1907 P. T. Forsyth made a prophetic statement: "If within us we find nothing over us we succumb to what is around us."

Remember the time in *Alice in Wonderland* where Alice meets the Cheshire Cat and anxiously asks, "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," says the Cat. "I don't much care where," says Alice. "Then it doesn't matter which way you go," says the Cat. And the serpent with him.

Last, when we don't live for heaven we have no real hope when hard times come. When there is no heaven, we have an intense need for everything to be right on earth. We can have no suffering, no pain, no distress here—we have an "inalienable right to happiness," we're told. But not by the Bible. Jesus said, "In this world you will have tribulation" (John 16:33). So long as this life is only a trip to a destination, that's o.k. But when it's the destination, then all is lost.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* describes the terrors of a Soviet concentration camp. He begins with the day of the arrest and the inquisition which comes before the sentence. He describes the tortures experienced by the unlucky ones. Endless, brutal tortures that break down all kinds of men and women—except for the few who cannot be broken. Those few are ready to die. The torturers have no power over them. As much as they enjoy living, they believe there is something more important than life. They're right.

Conclusion

So, are you living for heaven? How do you?

We live for heaven when we care more for people's eternal souls than for their temporal approval; when we use our money to build God's kingdom more than our own; when we ask God to use our suffering more than to solve it; when we remember that this life is the car, not the house, the road, not the destination; when we make sure every day that we're ready to die. Are you living for heaven?

If you are, one day you'll be so glad you did. The poet said it well:

*Think of stepping on shore
and finding it heaven,
Of taking hold of a hand
and finding it God's*

*Of breathing new air
and finding it celestial,
Of feeling invigorated
and finding it immortality;
Of passing through a tempest
to a new and unknown ground,
Of waking up well and happy
and finding it home.*

Think of it. Would you?