

Some Thoughts on Heaven...

So what *will* heaven be like? Given the myriad of images from St. Peter jokes, movies, television, and greeting cards, there is a lot to go on. But how many of these are just fanciful imaginings, perhaps based on a grain of truth and not bad in and of themselves, but rather unhelpful if we start to ask the deep, and sometimes difficult, questions of life and death--and especially what happens after death. As Christians, we should be keenly interested in what our faith and the Bible teach us about life, death, and the hereafter. This essay is a starting point for addressing what are perhaps some common questions about heaven. Sometimes we carry these questions without realizing it until we hear them asked by another.

Below are some common questions I've come upon:

I do believe there is Heaven, and I envision a "spiritual" consciousness. If there is a consciousness, then will there be an awareness of past and (then) present?

How much of this life will we remember in heaven?

Will heaven be a spiritual existence, not so much a physical body?

Will we meet loved ones in heaven, or do you think that is simply a hope given to comfort us now? What about meeting people we don't like?!

What will we actually do in heaven? Is it a "real" place or just a comforting idea?

These questions may seem to some quite basic, but they are questions that reside at the deepest level of our being and deserve to be answered. What follows are a series of responses that I've compiled to provide, if nothing else, a solid and helpful biblical foundation for pursuing further questions of life after death, heaven, and beyond. This is intended by no means of being exhaustive, but, as I mentioned at the outset, a starting place.

The first thing I want to do is look at the big picture of God's unfolding plan of salvation in terms of creation, fall, redemption, and re-creation. That will give us a context for discussing heaven and specifically resurrection, and how life today fits in between the beginning of the end (the resurrection of Jesus) and the end of the beginning (the Last Day). We'll then be able to look at more particular questions about what heaven will be like, etc.

The biblical vision of heaven and earth is that in the beginning heaven and earth were distinct but not separated. Thus Eden was Eden and heaven was heaven above, but God walked in the garden in the cool of the day, and angels moved in and out without difficulty or impediment, such as Satan and the angel set to guard the tree of life. (See Genesis 2:1-3:22.) After Adam and Eve eat the fruit, they are cursed and sent out of the Garden; this is called "The Fall." The effects of the Fall are fourfold. There is (1) a corrupting of human nature, (2) a corruption of inter-human relationships, (3) a corruption of the physical world, and (4) a corruption of humanity's relationship with God. The rest of the Story of the Bible tells us what God is going to do about all this. God must not only undo the damage done, he must maintain his own sense of justice and still remove sin from his world. What the unfolding Story tells us is that God's plan is not satisfied with simply restoring the status quo of Eden. In other words, the point of the Story of redemption is not simply to "reset" everything as it was in Eden, but to bring the creation to

its fullness of perfection, while still validating (rather than erasing) the actual history trod by sinful humans since the Fall and the great lengths God has gone to in order to bring salvation.

Thus, God's plan of salvation is twofold: both redemption and re-creation. Redemption is the forgiving and washing away of sins, foreshadowed in the skins that God fashioned for the man and woman. (See Genesis 3:21-22.) The clear but unwritten implication in these garments of animal hide is sacrifice; an animal's blood was shed in order for the shame and nakedness of the man and woman to be covered. This biblical pattern of sacrifice is later reiterated through the codes of the Mosaic Law and the sacrificial system established at the Temple in Jerusalem, and ultimately fulfilled in the shed blood of Jesus Christ on the Cross. This is the dimension of salvation most of us hear about and connect with. Re-creation, or rather new creation—or, to use the phrase in Revelation 21:1, a new heaven and a new earth – is the dimension of salvation often not as familiar. The idea is this: at the Last Day (Judgment Day) God will make a new heaven and new earth, perfected and glorious. Consequently, eternal life will have heaven and earth as the same place where God and his people will live together, for "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man; he will dwell with them and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God" (See Revelation 21:3). No separation between God and his people in the new creation. "Heaven," as we usually think of it, will in fact be a physical and spiritual existence, not simply a spiritual one.

This idea of new creation is based on Jesus' own resurrection from the dead, which is prefigured in many biblical accounts, from Ezekiel's valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37:1-14) in the Old Testament to the raising of Lazarus from the dead in the New Testament (John 11:1-44). The beautiful catch is that the new creation is not just a distant future event. When Jesus rose from the dead, the new creation was begun! His new, post-resurrection body was still physical; it could be touched (John 20:24-29) and he ate food (John 21:13-15). But it was a perfect body that could not die anymore and for which obstacles like walls were not a barrier. Jesus' death and resurrection has a beautiful symmetry with the original creation in Genesis, and it establishes a template for new creation. In Genesis, God finished his creating work on the sixth day and rested on the seventh (Genesis 2:1-3). Jesus finished his work of redemption on the cross on the sixth day (Good Friday) and rested dead in the tomb on the seventh day (Saturday). Then on the new first day (Sunday) he rose to new life. Thus, as the New Testament states, Jesus is the "firstborn from the dead," the first fruits of this dawning new creation on the new 'first day' (Easter).

Now, at this point we must balance the "already" with the "not yet." Already new creation has begun, but it is not yet fulfilled, and thus we live "in between" the ages, that is, between the Cross/Resurrection of Jesus (the beginning of the end) and his return on the Last Day, the Judgment Day (the end of the beginning). *Already* Jesus has been raised as the proof of redemption and the justification of sinners through faith in him; but *not yet* have they been resurrected, judged, and experienced eternal life. Already we are redeemed, but not yet are we perfected. Already we are justified, but we are not yet glorified. Just as Martha hoped for her dead brother Lazarus' resurrection on the Last Day, so we too hope in the resurrection (John 11:24-25). But the basis for our hope is the fact that Jesus *has already been raised*. Our faith therefore is not based just on fancy words or subjective inner experience, but the power of God in history and space and time (1 Corinthians 2:3-5), upon something already accomplished that can be witnessed to and verified. Our faith depends on this historical actuality of the Resurrection.

Our hope therefore is that we too shall share in a resurrection and a body like Christ's. (See 1 Corinthians 15:1-58.) Ultimately, the Christian understanding of "heaven" is not simply an ethereal,

spiritual realm of everlasting life, but a physical, real, actual new earth and heaven. God's design is for body and soul to be united for eternity, not separated for eternity. Granted, we live during the "in between" time, and as such there will be a temporary separation of body and soul at death; but the hope of the resurrection is that body and soul will be re-unified, and will be perfected when they are unified (more on this later).

Popular culture in America readily envisions heaven only in these ethereal terms and not in physical (i.e., resurrection) terms. We think of the Pearly Gates and St. Peter standing there, the butt of so many jokes; we picture ourselves receiving our golden harps and floating off onto our silver cloud. This reflects a common human misconception of the afterlife. For most religions, and especially most ancient religions, the body was viewed as bad and the soul as good. Thus the goal or the purpose of salvation was to free the soul from its bodily prison. For the ancient Greeks that meant flitting off into the ethereal yonder—escape. Similarly, the ancient Hindu and Buddhist vision of salvation was also to separate body and soul, not for escape but for oblivion, wherein the soul rejoins with the great Nothing, the great sea of "Existence" (Nirvana). Both of these run counter to the Christian (and to a large part, the Jewish) understanding of body, soul, and eternity.

The Christian view affirms what these others deny, namely the value of the individual and the value of the body. The biblical understanding of resurrection means that in heaven you will still be you and I will still be me, albeit you and me perfected. How great is that! This is much preferable to a view of salvation in which the individual's identity is to be erased. The biblical understanding also indicates that eternal life will happen on a new earth, and we will have homes and people and relationships and food and all good things. To put this in context, imagine the world we have now, but with no hunger, no pollution, no overcrowding, no crime, no ozone depletion, no earthquakes, no floods, nor any decay, illness, or death. Such a world is almost too wonderful to conceive, yet we can catch a glimpse of it in the glory of a beautiful landscape or sunset, a warm hearty dinner with friends and family. This is what the Greek vision deeply lacks—the innate value of the physical. Granted, this world is deeply sinful, broken, corrupt, and evil, and in desperate need of redemption and recreation; but the fact that it is physical is still of value. And while on earth we are still called to value it and strive for its well-being, even though any improvement will not be realized in any ultimate sense: we cannot build utopia on earth. The Gospel tells us that heaven comes down to us as a human (Jesus), so that one day when the earth is remade we may share in it with Christ as part of the inheritance we share with in him.

Now back to the "in between" topic. Since Jesus has already been raised, but we have not yet been raised at the Last Day, we live in this "in between" age. So what happens when we die in this age, awaiting still the return of our Lord in glory? The first Christians thought Jesus was coming back in a few weeks, or a few years at most. When he was gone longer and members of their churches started to die, they worried that the deceased would miss out on the resurrection and Jesus' return. A good chunk of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians addresses this. (See 1 Thessalonians. 4:13-18.) Paul also speaks of his own impending death, in Philippians 1:19-26. He states that if he stays alive, if he "lives in the flesh," he can continue to work and minister for Christ for the church's benefit; but if he dies, he will go to be with Christ, which is better by far. Thus, "to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). Clearly Paul envisions that when the faithful die, their souls will be with the Lord, at peace and at rest, albeit apart from their physical bodies. Beyond that the Bible does not give much detail, like what our perception of time will be, will I "feel" like I am floating around, etc. Nonetheless, this "soul-with-Jesus" hope is an encouraging and irenic truth which gives us comfort as we face our own deaths. However,

this soul-with-Jesus state is not permanent. We tend to halt our understanding of heaven at this point, but Paul takes us further to remind the Church of the resurrection, where the dead shall be raised and be with Christ forever physically, with new bodies like his. (See also 1 Corinthians chapter 15, especially verses 35-58, an extended description of the resurrection and the body.)

So let's now take all this and apply it to some of the questions given at the outset. One question spoke of a sense of "consciousness," which on the one hand is totally affirmed in the biblical view but on the other hand lacks the physical/resurrection dimension found in the Bible. The individual's consciousness and identity are valued by God, and are retained for eternity. To what extent, we cannot say. How much of this life will we remember after the resurrection? I don't know, and the Bible is not explicitly clear. What I can say with confidence is that when Jesus was raised, he still had full knowledge of Peter, and Thomas, and all his disciples; he knew their names, what they were like, and where to find them. So at minimum we can state that death, resurrection, and heaven do not involve wiping the mental slate clean. If I were to guess, I would imagine that when we reach the other side of death, this life/world and our memory and experience of it will be a bit like when we sleep and dream and then wake up and recall our dream. The dream is still real, our memory of it is real, but it has passed and now a new day with all its potential and life is before us, along with a good cup of coffee!

Furthermore, our understanding of heaven and salvation must be corporate, that is to say, we will not be alone there. Far from the misconceived popular idea of each heavenly spirit floating on a cloud, plucking a harp in ultra-individualistic isolation and bored out of their minds, the true reality of heaven is like a giant wedding feast, a party with food, music, dancing, laughing, beauty, wonder, friends, family, wine (and, I hope, beer!) and God right there in the middle of it, with Jesus sitting at the head of the table. Because we can be assured that I will be me and you will be you, we can rest assured that we will also know each other in heaven. Eternal life is still about relationship, and relationship perfected. No tribal divisions, no racism, no sneaking insecurities that make love grow cold or allow jealousy to twist it. No backstabbing or self-serving; only serving for the joy of serving.

Thus we may lay our loved ones to rest who die in the Lord, trusting in Christ to justify and raise them. I have said goodbye to many friends and family members in this life. But when I see them die with faith in Christ, I carry a seed of hope and joy that I shall see them again, not weak and sickly as when last I saw them on earth, but alive, truly alive, and glorious.

We must also take into consideration that in addition to family, friends, and loved ones, as well as quite a few complete strangers, many people will find themselves in heaven with people who, in this life, were cruel to them, enemies, people on whom no love was lost. To put it in the starkest of terms, what would a murder victim do when they meet their murderer in heaven? For such is possible and, given that Jesus and his saving grace are for sinners, I think it very likely. But in heaven all those will be there who have been cleansed by the Blood of the Lamb, who have repented of their sins, been forgiven of their crimes, and now live in bliss and perfection to sin no more. Even in this life, I know of instances where victims of crimes, or those who have been estranged from family or spouses, have found a very real peace and reconciliation with these people through Jesus Christ. I imagine heaven will be full of that, only better.

As for what we shall "do" in heaven that remains in large part a grand mystery. However, the Bible does give us a basis for having a few reasonable and concrete ideas of what we shall be doing. I would like to offer four aspects of heavenly life, each of which finds clear warrant in Scripture. However, we must acknowledge each's limitations in what is revealed. That is, each of these four aspects of heavenly life

are Scripturally sound, but beyond establishing their fact any further revealing of heaven's actual nature is left to conjecture at best and needs to be reverently allowed to be mystery.

First, as I have mentioned, the Bible in general and Jesus (in his parables) in particular repeatedly refer to heaven as a wedding banquet. So for starters there will be a lot of celebrating and partying in heaven – just without the drunkenness, vomiting, chemical abuse, fighting, fornicating, and debauchery that earthly partying often involves! Imagine being at a party not because you are trying to gratify yourself or make yourself look good to shore up some deep insecurity. Imagine being there not because you've been dragged there or coerced there, or because you are there to rebel against your parents, or to put on your flirt to hook up (only to worry about being totally rejected and not be able to hook up). Imagine not having to deal with all the guilt and consequences that inevitably come from such behavior. Imagine, instead, being at this party *because it is where you are supposed to be*. Because it is beautiful to be with those you love, even if you don't know them. Where you are free to dance, and laugh, and eat and drink without fear of judgment or fear of debauchery, and just enjoy it. I imagine heaven will be like that, only better.

Secondly, heaven is repeatedly referred to as Rest. Especially for those introverts out there for whom the idea of an eternal party might sound more like hell than heaven, we need to take a moment and wrap our minds around what it means to be at rest. In the Old Testament God's promise of land for Israel when they leave Egypt includes a blessing of rest, especially 'rest from their enemies' (Joshua 21:43-45). It will be a land flowing with milk and honey, where they will enjoy houses they did not build and vineyards they did not plant (Joshua 24:13). This is an allusion to the status of humanity in the Garden of Eden where all was provided freely and to be enjoyed without the need of toil. Like Eden, the Promised Land is to be a place of rest and fullness. In Psalm 95, God warns disobedient Israel that they "shall not enter my rest", the implication being both the Promised Land in the immediate sense (thus the wandering in the wilderness for 40 years) but also heaven in the eternal sense. Thus we can see in the unfolding themes of redemptive history that Sabbath, rest, and heaven converge to be referring to the same thing. It is therefore most fitting that Jesus even calls himself "The Lord of the Sabbath" (Matthew 12:8; Mark 2:28; Luke 6:5). Through Jesus' saving work on the Cross true rest, promised through the ages, is secured for ever after as an inheritance for sinners redeemed in him. For all of us who long for a true, deep, peaceful and secure rest from all the woes, worries, troubles, anxieties, betrayals, and pitfalls of this life, the Bible gives us a vision of heaven that is utterly serene and blissful. Blissful does not mean utterly boring. Our approach to time in heaven will be different: we won't age, we won't get sick or die. We won't ever have to rush! Imagine not having deadlines and demands hanging over your head. Sounds pretty good doesn't it!? Imagine being able to sit quietly on a beautiful mountainside, air so fresh you wish your lungs were bigger just to take a deeper breath, and feeling at peace. Because we also affirm and know that heaven is a physical place of new creation, it will have mountains, lakes, rivers, forests...perfect mountains, lakes, rivers, forests for us to enjoy. I recently just watched the Ken Burns documentary on the National Parks, and repeatedly stories are told of people who find peace and healing in nature, especially the spectacular natural beauty of so many of our Parks. I imagine heaven will be like that, only better.

Thirdly, heaven is depicted as a worship service. In Revelation chapters 4 and 5 the inhabitants of heaven are worshipping God. Praising the Lord for all the good things he has done, for bringing so many people through the valleys of pain and death, forgiving them and raising them to new life, shall indeed be a suitable occupation of heavenly life. Some people may hear this and think, "Augh, worship! If that's

what heaven will be like, then no thank you.” I realize that many times worship on earth can be less than inspiring. However, sometimes, just sometimes, you may walk out of church thinking it was simply a magnificent experience. You sang your heart out to wonderful hymns and music; heard a powerful and meaningful, Christ-centered sermon; enjoyed the presence of other worshippers; shared in the Sacrament of bread and wine; and were deeply moved, sealed, and encouraged of the salvation given you by God’s good grace. That is a worship service. I imagine heaven will be like that, only better.

Fourthly, God values human skill and work, and I believe the Bible indicates that there will be work for us to do in heaven. To what extent or to be especially specific I think goes beyond biblical warrant, but this idea itself is clearly validated in Scripture. Because eternal life will be physical *and* spiritual, not just spiritual, there will still be an earth to take care of. In the Garden of Eden, God gave Adam a job: to tend the garden and rule over it and the animals of creation. God also gave them a day of rest (Sabbath), so that their lives would not be defined nor dominated by their work. Work is good, but it is not god. After the Fall, humans build cities as manifestations of their rebellion against God. In Genesis chapters 4 and 11 (Cain in exile and the Tower of Babel, respectively), cities are made because of human arrogance, and with a selfish misuse of God-given skills. However, Revelation 21 gives us a great vision of the new heaven and the new earth. And where is the place where God will live with his people? A City! In the new creation, God does not simply enact a re-do; heaven is not Eden 2.0; it is the Heavenly Jerusalem. In Genesis God’s people live with Him in a Garden; in Revelation they live with Him in a City. Thus God redeems that which humanity was intended to originally do in creation, which is tend the earth they are given. This, presumably, includes our creative and constructive abilities. If sinners in this age can build Hagia Sophia, Notre Dame, and the Pyramids, imagine what redeemed and perfected humans can build! Personally I hope there are classic muscle cars in heaven, because only then will I have the resources, tools, and time to learn about and tinker with them! I’m also pretty sure that beer and wine will be present in heaven and be pretty righteous, too. I think I can get away with stating this because at the Last Supper, Jesus tells his disciples that he will not drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when he drinks it new with us in the kingdom of God; i.e., when he returns in glory on the Last Day. (See Mark 14:25, Luke 22:18, and Matthew 26:29).

To wind this up: All of this means that our understanding of heaven and eternal life is vastly more than simply “pie in the sky.” These are rich, powerful, meaningful truths about what life after death, and life after life-after-death, will be like. How can this not have some positive, beneficial impact on our lives here and now? Furthermore, these tenets of heavenly theology ought to deepen our faith in Jesus Christ and strengthen our understanding of his love for sinners, the power of his finished work on the cross to atone for our sins (both our sinful nature and our actual sins; both done and left undone), and the glorious righteousness he gives graciously to all who trust in him, so that they may not fear death or judgment or his return, but look to it with joy and fear and trembling.

BTS Phillips, 2014