

Questions and Answers about Heaven

(Questions texted or submitted by members of Old Mission for my sermon 9/7/2014)

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What does heaven look like? Scripture is varied in the description of the Kingdom of heaven. One way to answer this question is to look around and behold the beauty of nature. How could heaven be **less** than the glory of creation? *“Eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love Him.” (1 Corinthians. 2:9)*

What will be the role of women in heaven? There are no specifically assigned gender roles, male or female, in the Kingdom of God, either on earth or in heaven. *“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)* (Some religious groups disagree, like Muslims and Mormons.) Both men and women were created to equally reflect the image of God. (See Genesis 1:26-27) On earth, we are invited into equal partnership, both submitting our lives to Christ. *“Submit yourselves to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (Ephesians 5:21)*

Will there be marriage? Jesus clearly said, *“There is no marriage, or giving in marriage.” (Matthew 22:30)* So heaven will be different than life on earth. Having said that, I hope to spend eternity with Ann. *(I have checked with her and am glad to report that she agrees!)*

Will only 144,000 get into heaven? (Revelation 7:4 and 14:1) Clearly the Bible does not teach that, despite the belief system of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. The vision of the end of time in the Book of Revelation, like many other things in the book, is symbolic. In this case it represents equal numbers of worshipers from the 12 tribes of Israel. Just a few verses after the Revelation 7 reference, Revelation 7:9, says there will be *“a countless multitude before the throne.”*

If it isn’t 144,000 will it be too crowded everyone? How much room does a soul take?

How much room is there in heaven, if we are ashes to ashes and dust to dust? All our questions about space and size are limited by the finite limit of our human point of reference. But God and heaven are not limited by that. *“As heaven is higher than earth, so my ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts, says the Lord” (Isaiah 55:9)* As Robert Browning wrote, *“...a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?”*

Is it possible heaven is on earth and the souls of those who have passed on are all around us? Again the limits of our understanding do not limit what is possible for God. So yes, it is possible. From my perspective, anyone who claims to know about heaven for certain is exceeding our human capacity and limiting God. *“With God, all things are possible.” (Matthew 19:26)*

Do I have to believe certain things to go to heaven? *John 3:16* clearly says *“God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, so that whosoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.”* So we can say that God sent Jesus so we could know, or have assurance that by believing in him we share in the promise of heaven. And in *John 14:6*, Jesus said, *“I am the way, the truth and the life,”* so we can say that he is the way we know.

Who will make it in and who won't? In John 10:16, Jesus said, *"Other sheep have I that are not of this fold."* That means we cannot say that God is limited by the way we know and that we do not know who will be in heaven with us and who will not. Scripture is clear that it is not our responsibility to judge or to say who is in or out. That belongs to God alone.

Is heaven only for Christians? (What about everyone else?) Is heaven only for those who choose it? (See above answer.)

They say everyone is young in heaven. I wonder what age is young? Again heaven is not limited by our understanding of age. The best we can do is trust in God's assurance and love. So, 1 John 3:1-2 says *"What great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! ... Now we are children of God, but what we will be has not yet been revealed. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him and see him as he is."*

Are there tiers or levels in heaven? The closest thing in Scripture to there being different levels of heaven is found in 2 Corinthians 12:2, *"I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows."* Even that reference makes it clear that it may have been a dream or a vision. In ancient cultures, people commonly used the term "the heavens" to describe three different "realms" - the sky, outer space, and then a spiritual heaven. The concept of different levels of heaven likely comes from Dante's Divine Comedy where he describes heaven and hell as having nine different levels. This work is fiction, however, and not from the Bible.

Is heaven up? Where is heaven? Is heaven a place or a condition? The idea of a heaven being "up there" comes from the world view of Biblical times. In both Greek and Hebrew, the word for heaven means "sky." So God's kingdom and his throne were "up" as was the "place" to which Jesus ascended after the resurrection in Acts 1:11. We now know that in terms of the universe, "up there" is really "out there." For most of us "going to heaven" instead means going to be in the presence of God where we are free of pain, death and decay. *"For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality." (1 Corinthians 15:53)* We do think of heaven as a "place" somewhere, mostly because Jesus said in John 14 that he would prepare a "place" for us. However heaven will exceed that we can fully understand in these concrete ways.

Do you believe in purgatory? (Or a second chance way to heaven?) Is there purgatory? Many Roman Catholics believe in Purgatory. Most Protestant Christians do not. There is no record in the history of the early church about purgatory, it seems to date later in Christian history. It is said to be a place after death where our remaining sins are purged so we might become worthy to enter heaven. There are a variety of Scriptures that I believe conflict with the idea of purgatory. Romans 3:23 makes it clear that all of us have sinned, so in that way are not worthy of the glory of God. But Romans 3:24 says that God saves us by grace and not our works. Ephesians 2:8-9 clearly says, *"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."*

Why is there a heaven – what is the purpose? Secularists and atheists often criticize the concept of heaven. They see the purpose of a belief in Heaven is to reward people whose earthly lives and behavior conform to that the Church wants, and the concept of Hell is used to manipulate people by fear and intimidation. Both those criticisms have some truth in how the idea of heaven has been used in the history of Christianity. However the Scripture teaches a much different idea of heaven that it is *“living in the presence of God.”* Revelation 21:3-4 gives us a picture of that way of understanding heaven, *“Behold, the dwelling place of God will be with us. He will dwell with us, and we will be his people, and God himself will be with us. He will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things will have passed away.”*

Are there sports in heaven? (Are they rooting for the Chiefs or Titans today?) Zechariah 8:5 says that in the Kingdom of God, *“The streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets.”* That would seem to indicate that the idea of positive play and sports that bring out the best in us could be part of the Kingdom of Heaven. However the bitter and mean-spirited competitiveness and bad sportsmanship that often emerges from sports or team rivalries clearly is not the character of heaven.

Will we know our loved ones? Can people (our loved ones) see us? Can the saints who have gone on before us see us? Are they aware of us? There are several places in the Bible that indicate that we will maintain our identity in heaven and be recognizable to our loved ones and they to us. In Matthew 17:1-8, Peter, James and John recognized Moses and Elijah. In 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20 Paul expected to recognize the Thessalonian Christians in heaven. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:12, *“For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known”* *“I shall know just as I also am known”* would indicate that we shall know others as well as be known by others.

Is heaven immediate upon death? Do we go to heaven right away, or do we wait somewhere for the resurrection? Jesus was clear about our destiny, if we believe: *“I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.”* (John 11:25-26) But sometimes the Bible talks about the resurrection at the end of time, and sometimes it talks about being with Jesus at the moment of death, like Jesus said to the thief on the cross, *“I tell you the truth. This day you will be with me in paradise.”* (Luke 23:43) So both may be said to be true.

Since Jesus made wine what are the chances of getting a nice Cabernet in Heaven? It depends on your theology and doctrine. Some denominations and Christians believe that all alcohol use is wrong, so they probably don't expect to see it in heaven. My own theology is that all the good things that God has given us should be enjoyed. For me that includes wine, and other forms of legal beverages. The Bible is clear that drunkenness is a sin, however.

Is there sin in heaven? The easiest and best answer is *“No.”* Heaven is righteousness and joy and peace and love. Revelation 21 says, *“The former order of things will have passed away.”* Dr. Paul Helm says: *“We will not sin. We won't want to sin. Sin just won't be part of our world.”*

How do you answer those who say there is no heaven, that this is it? Listen to them and let them know what you believe. And be glad they are willing to talk about it. They may not be as certain as they sound or they would not even discuss it.

Will people be there I don't like? What about murderers? The short answer is that of course there will be people in heaven that you and I don't like. There may even be forgiven sinners, even those forgiven of the sin of murder. Heaven of course is not dependent on us, but upon God's grace which is available to all.

What comes after heaven? After heaven, there is still eternal life. Revelation 21 says there will be a *"new heaven and a new earth"* at the end of time.

Is there place for me? Yes. Tailor made for each one of us. Jesus says in John 14:3 he goes to *"prepare a place for you."* and *"In my father's house there are many rooms."* My hope is that the kids are not moving back home.

Will I see loved ones? I think so. The Scripture says there is relationship. We will have the capacity to... *"...know fully as we are fully known."* (1 Corinthians 13)

Will we become angels? No. Matthew 22:30 says, *"we will be like angels."* It does not say we will be angels. That is a fictional concept demonstrated in the TV series, *"Touched by an Angel."*

What will we look like? Ourselves, only better! Free of limitations, illness. 1 Corinthians 15 says *"...what is perishable will give way to the imperishable."*

Who will be there? Jesus will be, for sure. In heaven we will be *"...away from the body and at home with the Lord"* (2 Cor. 5:6-8.) And as I said above, I believe we will be with loved ones.

Are Christians the only ones who believe in heaven? No. The Vikings believed in Valhalla. Buddhists believe in a pure state of mind called Nirvana. Muslims and Jews believe in an afterlife. Many Hindus believe in reincarnation to an ongoing life of another form.

Will there be animals? (one of our kids) Isaiah 65 says there will be lions, lambs, wolves, and foxes, so I don't see why there couldn't be dogs and cats.

Do good works earn our way? They don't hurt. But NO! It's only by grace. *"For by grace you have been saved, not by works not by yourselves."* (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Can people in heaven see us? Yes. I think so. Hebrews 12:1 says, *"we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses."* Sometimes I feel that presence.

Have I read Heaven is for Real? Yes. I also have seen the film.

Do I believe the boy's experience was for real? I believe what happened to him was real for three-year-old Colton Burpo, and for his parents.

Is it possible? Yes, of course. All things are possible with God. His experience is not the first near death experience that people have written about. It happens often enough that there are some indicators of a life after death. This of course is not proof.

Was it just a dream? Maybe. It could have been, certainly.

Does it make my belief stronger? No. I already had a strong belief in something beyond this life, something more, that this life is not the end.

You seem rational, do you really believe in heaven? Yes, I do. I believe to confine the concept of life only to our human understanding is what is irrational.

Is there proof of heaven? Is there scientific proof? I don't have any. But I also cannot prove scientifically that my mother loved me. I only know she did.

Have you ever seen heaven? I often ask people these questions: *"Have you seen goodness at work?" "Have you seen beauty?" "Have you experienced grace and kindness?" "Have you been loved, really loved?"* I think if you have, then you've experienced a foretaste of heaven. I think heaven will be like all of these only even more.