

*The description of heaven we are given in Holy Scripture is largely figurative and leaves a great deal unsaid. For that reason Christians have to apply themselves to fashion a picture of the life to come.*

## **“Describing Heaven”**

**Revelation 21:1-22:6**

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I want to consider this important text twice: this morning dealing with *the nature of its description* of heaven; next time, Lord willing, *the burden or meaning* of that description.

### **Text Comment**

We are going to discover as we read the following description of heaven and the world to come that many of the images used so far in the book are taken up again in this description. I won't pause to point this out in each case but you will immediately realize how beautifully this description of the final act sums up and brings to completion all that has been said in the drama so far.

- v.3 There are a few statements in the Bible that serve to organize all the material in Holy Scripture. This is one of those statements: “God will be their God and they will be his people.” Remember: that is what God said to Abraham when he made his covenant with the patriarch and his descendants. “I will be your God and you will be my people.” It is a promise repeated many times in the Bible. For God to be our God and for us to be his people is the shortest way the Bible knows to say everything we mean by salvation. What is the simplest way to describe the condition of the unsaved? Paul says in Ephesians 2 that “they are without God.”
- v.6 God speaks but twice in Revelation and says much the same thing in both cases. In 1:8 he also identifies himself as the Alpha and Omega. These two statements from the one sitting on the throne are thus an inclusio, reminding us, as do the entire contents of the book in between the two statements, that God is both the beginning, as the creator of heaven and earth, and the end as the one who brings all things to their conclusion and fulfillment. [Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 26-27]
- v.16 We are by now well used to the symbolic numbers of Revelation. A cube 12,000 stadia in length, width, and height is symbolic of perfection.
- v.17 It is likely that the 144 symbolizes the fact that this is the city where the people of God will dwell. 12x12 speaks of the people of God, the Israel of God, in their eternal dwelling.
- v.22 Remember, we have already had mention of a temple in heaven on several occasions in the book (3:12; 7:15). In apocalyptic symbolism there is no great concern for consistency.

- v.25 In a symbol-laden account such as this one, it is not necessary to conclude that we will never see stars or a brilliant night sky in heaven. The night we will not encounter in heaven is the darkness of sin, doubt, fear, and death.
- v.26 Think of heaven containing everything that is best and purest and most beautiful on earth.
- 22:2 We have a tree of life in Eden, a tree that would bring immortality, and one in Heaven. Together they form an inclusio for the entire Bible. Ezekiel also describes a river of clear water with trees bearing fruit on each side, fruit that is for the healing of the nations. These are familiar images of a perfect world.

In the nature of the case our problem with heaven is not precisely the same as the problem posed by the Bible's teaching about hell, though actually it is nearly the same. In the case of hell the problem is that of unbelief. People either deny that such a place or condition exists at all, or, what is much more common, they do not take the prospect of it seriously. In the case of heaven, almost everyone is a believer, but, once again, hardly anyone takes heaven seriously. They believe it after a fashion; they may in the back of their minds expect it for themselves and their loved ones – they surely speak as if they did at funerals – but it bears little or no relation to their lives in this world just as the reality of hell, which most still confess, bears little or no relation to their lives in this world.

Surely that is the main reason why heaven has virtually disappeared from Christian preaching and, strangely, except in almost absurdly superficial ways, even from preaching at funerals. I remember attending the funeral of an unbeliever a some years ago – the relative of a woman then in this congregation – a man who was, by the estimation of every Christian who knew him, someone who neither made a serious profession of faith in Christ nor lived his life as a Christian. He had been an avid tennis player and at the funeral there were a number of jokes about his playing tennis in heaven. When a biblical subject is trivialized to that extent it is clear that it has lost its power over the thinking of people. No one worried that they might be making light of something too serious and too sacred to turn into a joke about tennis; no one worried that entrance into heaven was a subject of such gravity and that heaven was a place of such insupportable wonder that jokes about it would be taken by some as tantamount to blasphemy; and no one seemed at all concerned that the assumption that apparently everyone went to heaven would be taken as utter tripe by the serious section of the congregation at the funeral. That is the fate of heaven in our day, without a doubt. It has been marginalized to the point of irrelevance. The liberals don't preach it because they hardly believe in it in any form that could be described meaningfully to others and the evangelicals don't preach it because they fear that people won't find it interesting or that it will be positively offensive for the suggestion, which evangelical gospel preaching cannot entirely avoid, that some might not go there. The question in our day is not whether heaven exists – still the vast majority of people say they think it does – but what difference does it make and why should we think about it or bother with it when we have so much to concern ourselves with in this world. Heaven, like hell, has become a Gary Larsen *Far Side* cartoon.

Clearly in the Bible, however, heaven is the end and the goal to which everything points. It was that we might go to heaven that Christ came into the world, suffered and died. To take us to

heaven he will come again. To live with him and the Father and the Holy Spirit in unbroken communion in heaven is the great object of our salvation. “I go to prepare a place for you,” our Savior said as he left the world, “so that where *I am you* may be also.” Heaven is no afterthought in the Bible, still less a cartoon! Without it the entire biblical system of reality crumbles. And so it is in the Book of Revelation. The prospect of heaven is set before a persecuted and suffering church as the reason why she must remain faithful to Christ no matter the cost. Take heaven out of Revelation and the argument collapses. Revelation is a book that orients us to the future. It requires us to live our lives in the present *with a view to the future*. The future defines the meaning of the present in Revelation. And *heaven* is the believer’s future!

Like it or not the Christian religion crumbles without heaven. It is the reason for everything. So it deserves our careful study and reflection. And it is a subject that *requires* careful study and serious reflection. One reason unbelievers have so little interest in heaven is because their picture of it remains so vague. They have an idea of a wonderful, peaceful, and happy place, but there is no detail in their mental picture. That is one reason why their view of heaven lacks the power to attract and move them. But they might be surprised to learn that the most serious Christians have a similar problem and that the problem stems from the description of heaven that we are given in the Bible itself. The Bible is not forthcoming about heaven. The text we have just read is by far the longest and most detailed description of heaven given anywhere in the Bible, but as a description it leaves us still very much in the dark. Otherwise in the Bible, heaven is usually simply mentioned; it is not described. It is called variously: heaven, paradise, the eternal country or city, the Father’s house, or simply “home.” But rarely is much said about the place or about the life that we will live there. In Revelation and elsewhere, for example, we are told that we will “reign with Christ,” but we are never told just what that means. Reign over whom? How? Where?

What is striking about the Bible’s presentation of the world to come is that in the case of both heaven and hell it is not the literal and detailed picture we might have expected. Indeed, I would say this is a demonstration of the truthfulness and divine authority of the Bible’s teaching about heaven. If men were making up a description of heaven I can assure you they would have been more forthcoming in describing the place and the life of the place. They would not have left so much unsaid.

We have often noticed how image-laden and non-literal the Bible’s description of hell is. To be sure, the Bible’s presentation of hell is no less powerful for all that; its images and symbols are clear in their meaning and intention. We are certainly not left in any doubt as to whether hell is a place to avoid at any cost. But, we are not given any specific information about what people do in hell, how they spend their time, and precisely what and how they suffer. Francis Turretin, the 17<sup>th</sup> century Reformed theologian, sometimes called the Protestant Aquinas, wrote, “What the punishment really is, or in what does the essence of the pains of hell consist, is not easy to define.” [Locus XX, Qu. 7, par. 4]

And what is true of hell is also true of heaven. There is a clear depiction of heaven in the Bible as a place of wonderful life, of surpassing joy and perfect fulfillment. But it is, again, a figurative description and we are left largely to imagine what life will be like in the Father’s house. What

we will do, how we will live, how we will relate to God and to others, these and many questions are left unanswered.

Peter Kreeft, professor of philosophy at Boston College, has an interesting book on heaven entitled *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Heaven*. One of the chapters of that book is entitled, “Fourteen Questions about Heaven.” The answers that Kreeft gives to these questions do not always persuade me, but the questions themselves are an interesting demonstration of how little the Bible ever addresses the specific questions that naturally occur to us.

1. Do people in heaven see us now? Kreeft appeals to Hebrews 12:1 where it is said that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses and to the fact that, according to the Bible, our lives *are* observed by angels and concludes that people in heaven do see us now. He might have included some other biblical data to make a stronger case. But, in fact, none of that data is an actual statement that people now in heaven witness what we do from day to day.
2. Will we feel sorrow in heaven for those in hell? An important question. It is hard for me to believe that there will be no sorrow in heaven, even though the Bible says that God will wipe away every tear from the eye. For we will certainly remember our own sins and grieve the suffering we caused the Lord Jesus. If we are pure in heart, we will certainly grieve for the pain and suffering the Lord endured for us. The old Scot Presbyterian spoke of “an eternity of sweet weeping” on account of our sins. God is sorrowful for certain things, the Bible says, and heaven is the place where his glory dwells. But, what does that mean for us to say that in the world of joy there will be a pure sorrow? It is very hard to know. I cannot think that we will be isolated from or immune to the great tragedy of life, because love itself is bound up with the tragic. It is the greatest love that loves in the face of loss and of betrayal and we will know *that* love in heaven, surely, for it was the character of God’s love for us. But what does that mean? I am sure I cannot begin to say.
3. Will we possess or own things in heaven? Kreeft says that we will own everything and nothing, but offers no text. He says that there is no private property in heaven, but, again, offers no biblical demonstration.
4. Will we wear clothes in heaven? Adam and Eve did not before the Fall. Kreeft has some very interesting reflection on this question, but, again, nothing from the Bible itself. Revelation speaks of the saints wearing white garments, but that is a figure of speech. If we have a choice, I plan to keep my clothes on!
5. Are there animals in heaven? Well, Christ comes from there astride a war horse in Revelation 19 and a horse-drawn chariot comes to collect the prophet Elijah, but what can we say for sure about eternal life from those two instances? C.S. Lewis thought that there would be animals and even that family pets would be saved “in” their masters, as part of their extended family. [*The Problem of Pain*, 128-131] I’m pretty sure our late dog, Murray, will be there, but I’m not so sure about our present dog, Simon! But, anyone with a familiarity with the Bible knows how speculative all of this really is.

The persistence of such questions in our minds, and many others like them – chief among them “what will we do?” and “how will we relate to those we have known and loved in this world?” – is the demonstration of how little the Bible actually says about the life of heaven. What is perfectly clear in the description we have been given in Revelation 21 and 22 is that it is almost entirely figurative. John is not giving us here a travel agent’s brochure of the heavenly city. He is

overwhelming our imagination as his own imagination was overwhelmed. What does the New Jerusalem actually look like? We can hardly imagine. A cube constructed of pure gold but clear as crystal? What is that? And how do thick walls fit in or around that cube?

What descriptions we are given here and elsewhere are general in nature. The final state of the righteous is described variously as “eternal life” (Matt. 25:46), “glory” (2 Cor. 4:17), “rest” (Heb. 4:9), and then as a set of moral states and activities: knowledge (1 Cor. 13:8-10), holiness (Rev. 21:27), service (Rev. 22:3), worship (Rev. 19:1), authoritative judging or commanding of men and angels (Lk. 19:17,19; Matt. 25:21,23; 1 Cor. 6:2; we shall reign over the earth, Rev. 22:5), communion with other people (Heb. 12:23) and communion with God (Rev. 21:3).

Here heaven is a city; elsewhere it is “Paradise,” three times in the New Testament. “Paradise” is the word used for the Garden of Eden by the translators of the OT into Greek two hundred years before Christ. The word “Paradise” is probably Persian in origin and meant originally a lush garden or park. Paradise evokes, especially when the Tree of Life is said to be there (Rev. 2:7; 22:2), the image of a perfect world, lush, fruitful, perfectly suited for happiness.

Fair enough, but what does that mean? What will a day be like in heaven? What will we spend our time doing? How similar and how dissimilar will life be to what we know of it here? It is the generality of the description of heaven, the failure to answer such questions, that has led some to wonder why the Lord did not tell us more and make more explicit the future that awaits his people. Samuel Rutherford, in a letter to one of his favorite correspondents, Lady Kenmure, wrote,

“If you knew what he was preparing for you, you would be too glad. He will not...give you a full draught till you come up to the well-head and drink, yea, drink abundantly, of the pure river of the water of life, that proceedeth out from the throne of God and of the Lamb (Rev. xxii. 1). Madam, tire not, weary not; ...when you are got up thither, and have cast your eyes to view the golden city, and the fair and never-withering Tree of Life, that beareth twelve manner of fruits every month, you shall then say, ‘Four and twenty hours’ abode in this place is worth threescore and ten years’ sorrow upon earth.’” [Letter XIX, p. 68]

So, for Rutherford, the descriptions of heaven we are given in the Bible are as general and figurative as they are to keep us from forgetting all about what must be done in this world. There is surely something to be said for this. Christians who have enjoyed moments of spiritual ecstasy – that is joy in Christ and in the knowledge of him – have found that they are virtually overwhelmed by this wonderful distraction. Perhaps it would be very difficult to live in this world a fruitful life if one were always rapturously thinking about the life to come. I’m not sure, however, that this is so. I think it just as likely that the man or woman who was enraptured about heaven would be the most useful of all men and women on earth. I know a fellow who had such a moment of ecstasy when he was a young man and, when under that wonderful spell of divine love, the first thing that occurred to him was *to do something* for the Lord. He took up his Bible and went out to find people to invite them to church! He was under a sweet compulsion to serve the Savior of his life whose love had been poured out into his heart at that moment. So, I don’t

know whether Rutherford is right as to why we are not told more about heaven. Nevertheless, it is one explanation of the Bible's general way of speaking about heaven.

Another, very different, explanation is suggested by John Henry Newman. In one of his sermons, the evangelical turned Roman Catholic Cardinal argues that heaven is not for everyone; it is an acquired taste, and hard to acquire while our taste buds still resemble a crocodile's back. An unholy person would be restless and unhappy in heaven. [This summary of Newman's *Sermons and Discourses*, p. 24 in Plantinga's *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, 37n.] According to Newman we might argue that even Christians, sinful people that we remain, are ill-prepared to understand and to appreciate the life of heaven and that an explicit description might very well confuse and even disappoint us rather than whet our appetite for such a life. We are not yet ready to appreciate heaven for what it will be. It is very interesting, isn't it, that the caricatures of heaven that are so common in our culture – sitting on clouds and playing harps – are, frankly, uninteresting and boring. The sinner has a hard time thinking that heaven would be nearly as fun as earth, because he cannot imagine what would be fun in a place where God was everything and purity of heart was everyone's greatest pleasure.

Somerset Maugham expressed the unbelieving mind when he offered his opinion that "Perfection is apt to be dull." Well, there is a great deal of unbelief still in us Christians, which may explain why Christian people are not generally as eager to get to heaven as we might expect them to be. We are not entirely sure what will make it so wonderful a place to be. And perhaps we cannot know that until we are fit to be there.

But, however tempted we may be to prefer this life to the life of the world to come, any believer studying the images used to describe heaven and the biblical statements about it knows that it is a place much to be preferred to this world and this life. Paul says straight out that, for a Christian, to die is better by far than to go on living because of the great gain it is for believers to be where the Lord is.

But, as to how it is so, we must speculate. If all we have are images and symbols, then we are, as it were, invited to spin out the meaning of them into a more literal account of heavenly life. Some of these speculations, I think, are clearly of little value and more likely to be wrong than right.

For example, one speculation is that there are levels of heaven. Some Jews in the days of Christ spoke of there being seven such levels. That idea was taken up later by some Christian heretical sects and, interestingly, also by Mohammed in the Koran. It has been thought by some that Paul gives some support for the idea of these levels in heaven (as Dante's circles of hell) when he speaks of himself being taken up to the third heaven in 2 Cor. 12:2. It is more likely, however, that what Paul means there is simply heaven as we understand the term. In speaking of the third heaven Paul refers by implication to the first heaven which is the sky, the second heaven which is outer space, the place of the sun, moon, and stars, and the third the heaven which is where God's glory dwells and where the saints will go to live forever.

Another interesting speculation about heaven is that everyone there will be around 30 years of age! A Scot preacher commented on this.

“Augustine and other fathers were surely right in their idea that our bearing the image of Christ includes the likeness of apparent age, and that childhood will be brought up, and old age brought back to the likeness of the mature and perfect yet youthful manhood in which Jesus died and rose again. For however beautiful the hoary head is on earth, it is the ripe fruit of decay, and infancy with all its loveliness would cease to be attractive if it did not grow both in wisdom and in stature...” [Alexander Moody Stuart, in *Memoir*, 197-198]

Now that may be more likely. After all, we have all wondered what would become of the babies who died and went to heaven and the old people. But, still, we are only speculating. But, then, that is all we can do. Some speculations must come much closer to the mark. Here is Archbishop Whately on what friendship will be like in heaven.

“I am convinced that the extension and perfection of friendship will constitute a great part of the future happiness of the blest. Many have lived in various and distant ages and countries, who have been in their characters – in the agreement of their tastes, and suitableness of dispositions, perfectly adapted for friendship with each other, but who of course could never *meet* in this world.... The highest enjoyment of the blest will be the personal knowledge of their great and beloved Master. Yet I cannot but think that some part of their happiness will consist in an intimate knowledge of the greatest of his followers also; and of those of them in particular, whose peculiar qualities are, to each, the most peculiarly attractive.” [Cited in Wilbur Smith, *The Biblical Doctrine of Heaven*, 194-195]

I’m sure he’s right. One of the greatest pleasures of that place will be the people we will meet and get to know and love and whose lives we will share. Surely *that* is right even though the Bible never actually describes the fellowship of the saints in heaven. I do not think that such speculating is a bad thing. I think the Bible’s way of speaking about heaven is a virtual invitation to speculate about the life of heaven. We must be careful not to give too much weight to these speculations, but we must in some way take to heart the information that we are given in the Word of God.

Much of present day thinking about the afterlife is utterly uninformed and unbiblical. For example, according to a recent survey, among evangelical Christians – people who claim to be born again and who believe that they will go to heaven because of their faith in Jesus Christ – 10% also believe in reincarnation, 29% believe it is possible to communicate with the dead, and 50% believe that people can also earn their way to heaven by good works. Even among the atheists contradictions like these are rife. 50% of those who called themselves atheists said that every person has a soul, that heaven and hell exist, and that there is life after death. Go figure. What seems to be happening is that in our day people actually expect that God will change his nature and his moral principles for their personal benefit and conform them to their tastes, whatever they may be. The objectivity, the reality of heaven is slipping away and in its place remains a vague idea of a happier future with which folk keep at bay the darkness of life and the inevitability of death. What is clear, in any case, is that there is very little serious thinking about heaven or hell and that people are content to think whatever they please.

Not for us, brothers and sisters. The Bible has a doctrine of heaven. It tells us many things about what life will be like there, even if it does so in very general and figurative ways. That does not mean we cannot know; it only means that we can know only so much about heaven until we are there.

But of this we can be sure: if those who are in heaven – at least so much of heaven as now exists; the paradise to which Jesus took the thief on the cross the day of his crucifixion – were permitted to come back from there, they would have wonderful things to tell us. To those of you who are heartbroken and sorrowful, they would say, “Don’t mourn as those who have no hope. You will not believe how wonderful is the place to which you are going!” To those who are struggling with their doubts, they would say, “Hang on, keep going, you can’t believe how wonderful it is here.” To those who are tempted they would say, “Suffer any manner of hardship rather than hazard your place in the city of God.” And to the unsaved they would say, “Make your peace with God; find forgiveness in Christ now while you can; you do not want to fail to come to this place of light, peace, and joy.” That is what they would say to us coming back down to earth from the New Jerusalem.