

“Heaven”

Some children were asked about heaven. Here are their replies:

What is heaven? “It’s where girls get turned into angels...and then God tries to do the best He can with the boys.” (This must have been a *girl* who answered this!).

How did heaven begin? Seven-year-old Robyn explains, "A lot of people in the ancient years were crying because their grandmas and pas were dying, so God said, 'All right already, you win!' . . . And so he made heaven a beautiful place and he let the grandparents stay there forever."

Steve, age 9: “When you die, God takes care of you like your mother did when you were alive – only God doesn’t yell at you all the time.”

6 year old Cara: “God is sitting in heaven, but He isn’t on a throne or anything, no sir, He’s sitting in a garden playing with the children and the animals and letting them climb on Him.”

Julie, age 10: “Only the good people go to heaven. The other people go where it’s hot all the time like in Florida.”

Well, do only “the good people” go to heaven? Does God take care of you there without yelling at you? Today, I’d like us to look at what the Bible says about heaven.

There are people who don’t believe in a heaven or an afterlife, or they aren’t sure. Maybe you’re one of them. But most people want to believe in some kind of heaven. These children have their thoughts about heaven. But adults have their views too – which may or may not be based on the Scriptures. For instance, the current book and movie, *The Shack* is a rather fanciful view of God and heaven that has little to do with Scriptural teaching.

The Bible says that heaven is where God is. Psalm 11:4 says, “The Lord is in his holy temple, the Lord’s throne is in heaven.” In the Lord’s Prayer we pray, “Our Father, *who art in heaven*” (Matthew 6:9).

Also, the Bible says heaven is under God’s rule. God rules and reigns in heaven. God’s will is done completely. God’s will isn’t done fully here on earth; that’s why in the Lord’s Prayer we pray: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth, *as it is in heaven*” (Matthew 6:9).

If God’s will is done completely in heaven, then evil and pain and suffering and death will be ended! Revelation 21:4 attests to this: “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things have passed away!” Praise God! Isn’t *that* something to anticipate!

Where is heaven? People of the Bible had a different view of the universe than what we know today. Hebrews believed that the earth is flat, and that above the earth was the “firmament”, which was like a blanket stretched across the sky. Above this firmament was heaven, where God

lived. Today, with our knowledge of space and our seeing actual pictures from space, it may be harder to think of heaven as being “up there”. As I recall, when the first Russian cosmonaut circled the earth, he mockingly remarked that he didn’t see God or heaven.

Where is heaven? We don’t know. Is it a *physical* place? Is it a *spiritual* realm? Perhaps it is a *physical place* trillions of light years away, hidden from our observation in the vastness of the solar systems and galaxies. Or, it could be a totally different realm of existence that we can’t access while we’re in this mortal body. Here is where faith kicks in: Can we believe that there is a heaven even if can’t see it or are not sure of its location?

What is heaven like? It may surprise us to learn that the Bible doesn’t give us many specific details about heaven. Most of what *Jesus* told us about heaven was *implied*, or expressed in *Parables*. He would say, “the kingdom of heaven *is like*” – then compare it to something tangible, like a grain of mustard seed, or like a man stumbling upon a hidden treasure.

There *are* some descriptions of heaven, like in the Book of Revelation. For example, it describes heaven as being lined with streets of gold, adorned with precious gemstones. Do we take this literally? There was this Sunday School class where members of the class were studying the subject of heaven. One person began to give precise dimensions: it was so many furlongs long, etc. Personally, I think this is foolish. I believe we’re dealing with *symbolism, imagery*. Gold, gemstones, represented something precious and valuable. The writers of the Bible are struggling to describe what is beyond human description.

Heaven is a completely different plane of reality. It is beyond our ability to comprehend. It’s like trying to describe the Grand Canyon if you’ve never been there, or seen pictures of it. As the popular song about heaven says, “I Can Only Imagine”. It’s going to be so much better than we can ever imagine! The Apostle Paul was expressing this when he wrote: “Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

People often wonder: ***Will we know each other in heaven?*** I think it’s pretty clear from Scripture that we will know each other. Remember when Jesus went up on the mountain and was transfigured (His clothes and face became dazzling white with the glory of God). Moses and Elijah appeared. They still retained their identity even after having been dead for many years. The New Testament teaching of the “resurrection of the body” essentially means our unique selfhood and personhood will be retained in a new form in the life to come. Now if we retain our identity, I would think we will recognize each other.

What will we look like in heaven? When we get to heaven, will we look like we do now? *I hope not!* Maybe I’ll look like Brad Pitt! Maybe I’ll be built like Sylvester Stallone! Will we look like we did the day we died? Will babies who die be babies in heaven? The Bible does not answer those questions.

We do know that in heaven we will not have a physical body. Someone in the Corinthian

Someone in the Corinthian church asked the Apostle Paul: “What kind of body will we have in the resurrection?” We have Paul’s response. “But someone will ask, ‘How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?’ Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body....so it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body...what I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality” (1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-44, 50-53).

Our physical body is not suitable for life in eternity. We will be a *spiritual* body that will not decay or perish. Isn’t it great to know that we won’t have to contend with a body that gets wrinkly and sags and gets sick and ceases to function! We can get a clue of what our heavenly body will be like by the descriptions we are given of Jesus after His resurrection, when He appeared to His disciples. They recognized Him - kind of – although not immediately. He could appear and disappear. He didn’t have any limitations of time and space.

No, we don’t have all the details of what our heavenly body will be like. But we can trust that God knows what He’s doing! 1 John 3:2 says, “Beloved, we are God’s children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like Him, for we shall see him as he is.”

Will relationships be the same in heaven? If you are married, will your husband or wife be your husband or wife in heaven? Now you had better not say, “I hope not!”. What if we are divorced and remarried? What if our spouse has died and we’ve married someone else?

This is one of the clearest teachings of Jesus. Jesus says that there won’t be marriages in heaven, but a different type of relationship. One day a group known as Sadducees tried to trick and ridicule Jesus. They didn’t even believe in a resurrection, yet they set up a hypothetical situation where a woman was married to seven different husbands in succession, after each of the previous husbands had died. Then the Sadducees ask Jesus: in the afterlife, whose wife will she be? Look at Jesus’ answer: “Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is God not of the dead, but of the living” (Matthew 22:29-32).

What will we do in heaven? There's an old story about two friends who loved to play baseball. Even though they were getting up in years, they still played – in the over 60's league, year after year. They wondered if there would be baseball in heaven. So they agreed that the first one of them who died would come back and tell the other if there was any baseball in heaven. Well, the one man died. Sure enough, the first night after he was gone, he appeared to his surviving friend. "Joe, it's true, we play baseball in heaven. And get this – there's a big game next week – and I'm the starting first baseman!" "Great, that's good news for you!" the somewhat surprised and shaken friend said. But then the dead man said, "But there's some bad news. You're playing shortstop."

I doubt that there is baseball in heaven. (If there is, I'd bet that the Angels are one of the teams!).

What will we do in heaven? There's a popular image that in heaven we'll be floating around on clouds, perhaps playing harps or sipping Orange Julius'. Or, that we'll be loafing all day in a big picnic grove enjoying a huge family reunion.

I don't think the Bible teaches that we'll be spending forever just loafing and doing nothing! Having nothing to do can be boring! Imagine spending forever with nothing to do.

I believe there's work to do in heaven! This is suggested in some of Jesus' parables, where the reward for faithfulness is more responsibility. In 1 Corinthians 6 there is an interesting section where Paul says God's people are going to judge the world and even judge angels in the life to come. So, I believe there will be work to do – meaningful activity. You may say, "Please don't tell me I'll have to do work when I go to heaven!" If you're retired, maybe you're thinking, "I'm enjoying retirement so much I would dread the thought of having to go back to work! But I'm sure if there is work in heaven it will not be drudgery. It will be purposeful, fulfilling, invigorating."

One thing for sure we will do in heaven is worship and praise God. We get a glimpse of this in the Book of Revelation: "After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying 'Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power to our God...and from the throne came a voice saying, 'Praise our God, all you his servants, and all who fear him, small and great.' Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out, 'Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns'" (Revelation 19:1,5-6). *God* is the center of what goes on in heaven, not people. We will do what we were created to do, that is glorify God and enjoy Him forever!

Think about this: If we're not much into praising and worshiping God now, would we fit in heaven? If we're too busy and self-absorbed to let God occupy a central place in our life now, could we ever feel at home in heaven? There's going to be a lot of praise gatherings and song services celebrating the glory of God, and the time to get in the groove for that blast in heaven is now!

This leads us to the last, and perhaps the most important question about heaven: ***How do we get to heaven?*** Billy Graham tells how, early in his career, he was in a small town to preach. Wanting to mail a letter, he asked a young boy for directions to the post office. After the boy told him how to get there, Billy thanked him and said, “If you’ll come to the Baptist church tonight, you can hear me telling everyone how to get to heaven. “I don’t think I’ll be there,” the boy said. “You don’t even know your way to the post office.”

Well, how do we get to heaven? This is not just an academic question to discuss. It’s not just a matter of logic and reason, but a question of *heart and soul*. Will I spend forever with God? Will I be able to join family members and friends who’ve made it to glory land?

There are many verses in the New Testament that describe the way to heaven. And they all have to do with Jesus! Heaven, and living with God forever, are possible because of what Jesus did for us in His suffering, death and resurrection. God has offered us the gift of forgiveness for our sins, and life forever with God through Christ! (I know, you’ve heard that in church a million times. Sometimes we can hear it so much that we become immune to the power of that truth)!

Often when the New Testament writers speak of having a life in heaven they use the term “eternal life”. Eternal life is life with God, here and now, and forever! Consider that great text from John 3: “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have ***eternal life***” (John 3:16). The Bible says that when we believe in Christ and follow Him, we *already* begin to experience “eternal life” - a life with God, a new life, a little bit of heaven on earth. Jesus once prayed, “This *is* eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3). Eternal life begins *now*, when we believe in Christ and follow Him!

We have to be clear here: “believing” in Jesus is more than just believing in our head that there was a Jesus. It’s more than just a head thing, believing the right stuff. “Believing” in the Bible involves action, it involves the whole person. It means *following* Jesus, making Him and His will the center of our life! Jesus said this, “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life...not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven (Matthew 7:13-14, 21).

Believe in Jesus – all He said, all He did - with all you’ve got... trust that His sacrificial death on the cross can make up for all your sins...follow Him each day and hunger to do His will. And your feet will be firmly planted on the road that leads to heaven!

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