

A PLACE CALLED HEAVEN

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When the term “Heaven” is mentioned, most people have a vague idea of what is being discussed. However, they usually view Heaven as a place where people leisurely recline on fluffy clouds, sporting a halo and playing a harp, while Saint Peter busies himself with greeting new arrivals at the pearly gates. While this scenario makes for nice cartoons and cute pictures, it bears no resemblance to the biblical concept of Heaven. What exactly is this place that has captured the imaginations and dreams of believers for centuries? Is it as surreal as we make it out to be? Does it really even exist?

HEAVEN DEFINED

In the Bible, when we come across the word “heaven” or “heavens” we need to understand that it is not always talking about exactly the same thing. There are several words translated as “heaven” in our English Bible.

We will first take a look at the Hebrew words for “heaven” that we find in the Old Testament. The first is the word *shawmayim* (Strong’s 8064 & 8065), which describes the visible universe, or the heavens in general. We find this word in Genesis 1:1 – “In the beginning God created the **heavens** and the earth.” It also appears in Psalms 19:1 – “The **heavens** declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork.”

The second Hebrew word for “heaven” is *shachaq* (Strong’s 7834). This word literally means “a powder (beaten small)” and is used by analogy to mean “a thin vapor” or to describe the firmament. It is also translated into English as “skies,” “clouds,” or “dust.” The psalmist Ethan used this word to show that God was greater than any being that could be found in the universe. “For who in the **heavens** can be compared unto the LORD? Who among the sons of the mighty can be likened to the LORD?” (Psalm 89:6). This word often appears in the same verse as *shawmayim*.

Before we leave the Old Testament, I would like to point out something Solomon said in his dedication prayer for the Temple. “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built?” (I Kings 8:27). The words “heaven” and “heavens” are translated from *shawmayim*. Solomon’s point is that God is so much greater than anything we can know. Solomon constructed a

Temple for Him, but God did not need one. How could a God who cannot be contained by the “heaven of heavens” cram Himself into a man-made structure?

Moving to the New Testament, we discover three Greek words that are translated as “heaven.” The first is *ouranos* (Strong’s 3772), which means “the sky,” and is used when generally referring to the sky or all the heavens. We will find that it is a base word for the other two Greek words that we will study. Most often when you see the word “heaven” or “heavens” in the English New Testament, it is translated from this word *ouranos*. In Matthew 8:20, it is translated as “air.” “And Jesus said unto him, ‘Foxes have holes and the birds of the **air** have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.’” It also appears in Matthew 5:34. “But I say unto you, do not swear at all: neither by **heaven**, for it is God's throne...”

The next word we find is *mesouranema* (Strong’s 3321), which is a compound of the words *ouranos* (see above) and *mesos* (Strong’s 3319), which means “middle.” Therefore, it can be defined as “mid-heavens.” It appears only three times in the Bible—in Revelation 8:13; 14:6 and 19:17. In each case it refers to a situation wherein either or birds are flying through “the midst of heaven.”

The third word that we need to know is *epouranios* (Strong’s 2032), which is a compound of *ouranos* and *epi* (Strong’s 1909), which means “over” or “above.” This word can be defined as “above the sky” or “celestial.” It is often translated in the Bible as “heavenly.” Just a few of the places you can find this word are Ephesians 1:20, Philippians 2:10, and Hebrews 12:22.

Epouranios is the best Greek word we have to describe the abode of God. Somewhere out beyond what we can see is a place where Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father. The Apostle Paul mentioned that he knew a man that was caught up to the “third *ouranos*,” a man we believe to be Paul himself (II Corinthians 12:2).

Paul’s testimony indicates that he made a distinction between three different heavens. The first heaven would be the firmament of the earth, the air we breathe. The second heaven would be the home of the stars and planets, while the third heaven would be above all these—the place where God abides—a place about which our knowledge is unfortunately quite limited. This also seems to be the place Jesus mentioned in John 14:2—“In my Father’s house are many

mansions...” This is the location of the throne of God, a throne that Isaiah was able to see in the vision that he recorded in the sixth chapter of his book.

The “third heaven” is also the location of believers who have died. In the Old Testament, those who lived by faith were transported to Paradise. When Jesus died, He brought them out of Paradise and into the presence of the Father.

Therefore He says: “When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men.” (Now this, “He ascended”—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.

(Ephesians 4:8-10)

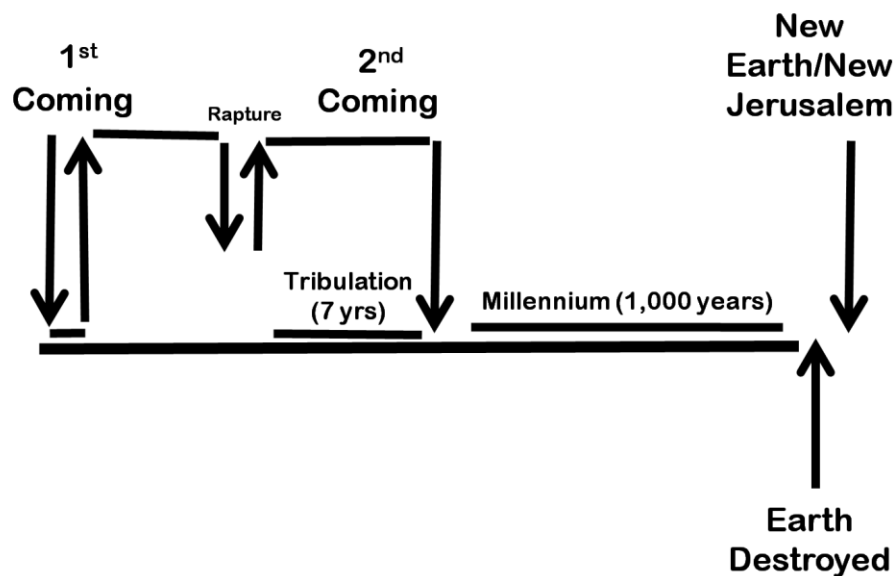
Ever since that time, every believer in Jesus Christ who dies is also immediately ushered into the presence of God.

So we are always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. For we walk by faith, not by sight. We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord. (II Corinthians 5:6-8)

Although these departed believers are in the presence of the Lord, they are not settled into their eternal home quite yet. Their bodies are still decaying somewhere on the earth. It would be impossible for any of us corruptible human beings to cross the threshold into the third heaven without an immense transformation taking place. Corruption cannot inherit incorruption (I Corinthians 15:50). The greatest technology we have today cannot get us there. However, Jesus, in His risen body and before a group of dumbfounded disciples, was able to physically ascend through the clouds all the way to the presence of God.

HEAVEN DELIVERED

If the dead in Christ are not yet in their eternal home, where is it? *What* is it? To help us understand the truth of Heaven, we need to understand the timeline of eschatological prophecy. That's just a technical way of saying "what is going to happen in the future." This is how it will happen: Jesus is one day going to come part way back to the earth in what we call the "Rapture." The bodies of those who are with God already will be raised, made incorruptible, and reunited with their souls. Immediately after this, the bodies of the living saved will be transformed into incorruptible bodies, and they will go to be with God for about seven years. After this period of time, during which incredible suffering takes place on the earth, Jesus will return physically to the Mount of Olives, causing it to split wide open (read about this in Acts 1:11 and Zechariah 14:4). The famed Battle of Armageddon will take place during which Jesus will drive His enemies out of Jerusalem, bind Satan for 1,000 years, and throw the beast and false prophet into the lake of fire (Revelation 19:11-20:3). Following this will be a 1,000-year peaceful reign of Christ on the earth. After that, Satan will be set loose and will incite all the nations of the world to converge upon Jerusalem. God, however, will destroy him and the armies, sending Satan to the lake of fire (Revelation 20:7-10). For all of you visual learners, here it is in a graphic format:



This is when things get really exciting. Beginning in Revelation 21:1, we can start reading about a new heaven and a new earth. The old one is gone, and a new one has come. See what Peter has to say about it:

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. (II Peter 3:10-13)

This earth as we know it will be destroyed. The sin curse will be gone. We will be living in a new city, on a new earth, complete with new heavens. God will give us the chance to start over.

Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. (Revelation 21:1-2)

A woman is said to be the prettiest on her wedding day, the day that she is “adorned for her husband.” That is the beauty of the New Jerusalem—she is perfect in every way. How perfect? Let’s look at the description of her.

HEAVEN DESCRIBED

The New Jerusalem that will be placed on the new earth is actually what we are describing when we speak of “going to Heaven.” Some believe the old earth will be totally destroyed, and some believe it will be purified by fire. Whether the

first one is annihilated or melted, the new earth that is formed will have no more curse. God Himself will move His dwelling place to this new earth. All the tears, sorrow, pain, and death are forever departed from those who have trusted Christ.

And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away." Then He who sat on the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new." And He said to me, "Write, for these words are true and faithful."

(Revelation 21:3-5)

The capital of this new earth will be the beautiful city called the "New Jerusalem." The old Jerusalem was the capital of the Jews and has been destroyed and rebuilt several times. Currently the Muslims are in a fight with the Jews over who owns the city and the site where Solomon's temple used to stand. In the New Jerusalem, no wars will be waged. I cannot even begin to imagine the beauty and peace of this city, much less try to describe it. So, I will let the Bible do the speaking.

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came to me and talked with me, saying, "Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God. Her light was like a most precious stone, like a jasper stone, clear as crystal. Also she had a great and high wall with twelve gates, and twelve angels at the gates, and names written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel: three gates on the east, three gates on the north, three gates on the south, and three gates on the west. Now the wall

of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. And he who talked with me had a gold reed to measure the city, its gates, and its wall. The city is laid out as a square; its length is as great as its breadth. And he measured the city with the reed: twelve thousand furlongs. Its length, breadth, and height are equal. Then he measured its wall: one hundred and forty-four cubits, according to the measure of a man, that is, of an angel. The construction of its wall was of jasper; and the city was pure gold, like clear glass. (Revelation 21:9-18)

This is going to be one huge city. It will be a cube, measuring 12,000 furlongs in each direction. This translates to almost 1,400 miles in every direction, including up. That is approximately the distance between Chicago, Illinois, and Miami, Florida. The city will be surrounded by a wall of jasper that stands about 216 feet high.

The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with all kinds of precious stones: the first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, the fifth sardonyx, the sixth sardius, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprased, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. The twelve gates were twelve pearls: each individual gate was of one pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass. (Revelation 21:19-21)

We hear a lot of talk about “the pearly gates” that we expect to see guarding the entrance to Heaven. This is a misnomer, as the gates will not be “pearly” but rather a solid pearl. One gigantic pearl per gate. Of course, I have to wonder—*how big are the heavenly oysters?* Only God can come up with such a pearl.

But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light.

And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory and honor into it. Its gates shall not be shut at all by day (there shall be no night there). And they shall bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it. But there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever.

(Revelation 21:22-22:5)

Along the banks of the “river of water of life” will grow “the tree of life.” Whether there is one tree on either side of the river or twelve trees is not clear to me, but what is obvious is that twelve types of fruit will be produced by them. These trees are most likely similar to the one that was at the center of the scandal that caused Adam and Eve to be banished from the Garden of Eden. God knew that if they ate from that tree, they would live (Genesis 3:22), so He removed them from the Garden. In the New Jerusalem, the fruit from these trees will be free for all.

How could anyone with even a simple understanding of this city not yearn to be there? Unfortunately, there are many who will never get to take part in eternal life in this beautiful new earth and city. I would like to call attention again to Jesus' words on the matter. “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6). The perfect life on a perfect earth

for eternity is only for those who put their faith in Jesus Christ. Admittance is free because of the price Jesus paid. All you have to do is receive it. Then the promise of eternal life in this beautiful new city will be yours. As an added bonus, “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away” (Revelation 21:4)