

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

37 Is There a Real Heaven?

Scriptures: Matthew 6:20-23

An old graffiti joke draws attention to the words scribbled on a billboard declaring "Christ is the answer!" Underneath, some curious, if not hostile, person had later written underneath the inquiry, "What was the question?" Our study this morning is of interest to people who understand that Christ is indeed the answer, but who continue to ponder certain issues which remain unanswered to their satisfaction.

One such question has to do with heaven. What will it be like? In fact, there are many questions which have to do with heaven which are often raised. We will consider a number of them at this time. In a previous study we have sought to answer the inquiry concerning available evidence for believing that heaven exists. We have said that secular culture questions a heaven and the full measure of justice. We have seen that scientific data is in keeping with the existence of heaven, and that there is an analogy to be found in nature. We have discussed the fact that there is a universal longing to live on and we reflected upon the fact that the dying bear witness to a future life. Furthermore, it remained for Jesus to give certitude to an afterlife.

I. WHY IS THERE SUCH AN AVERSION TO THE SUBJECT OF HEAVEN?

As the pastor of a Christian congregation I believe it is important for our church family to have an understanding of what the afterlife will be like. Vagueness concerning heaven does an injustice to the believer. It deprives him of the confidence which exorcises the haunting specter of death. A hazy understanding of the beyond does harm to the Christian faith and robs it of one of its strongest appeals. Not a few people throughout the world have looked askance at Christianity, and have swelled the ranks of other religions and cults for no other reason than the fact they have appeared to offer a better and more definite idea of what comes after death than the one Christ has declared.

This is a great tragedy. The fault is not with our faith, but with those who expound it. You see, what is often said and what is often done does not all the

time correspond with the teaching of Jesus or those apostles who went on to interpret His teaching. In the hands of teachers and pastors has been placed a revelation, an inscripturated body of truth, the Bible. It has contained through the centuries clear information concerning heaven. Yet, strange to say, little more than elementary truth has been grasped by believing people. Christians often think of themselves as people of the Book, but easily slip from its teaching only to find themselves wanting when it comes to death and dying. I cannot help but feel the thinking is that it is not possible to have a fuller understanding of heaven than the generations which preceded them. Avenues of larger apprehension are thus closed and the indefinite thinking of the past lingers on. The result is that even the most stout hearted in faith are dismayed at the prospect of leaving this life.

My friends, this is not as it ought to be. Can this be what the Lord, who conquered the grave, intended? Surely not. Oh, how inconsistent we can be. We sing hymns representing ourselves as those who welcome death, but we shrink from the thought that God might take us at our word. Is it that we are intentionally insincere? I think not. I believe the uneasiness we feel is a result of the vagueness of knowledge we possess. Having little idea of what awaits us when the curtain falls, we lapse into an unchristian restlessness. The thought of being plunged into an unpictured and imprecise state of being is hardly a welcome one. This question has been a bit of an aside, but I have a concern for the antipathy which surrounds the subject of heaven.

II. WHERE CAN WE GO TO FIND OUT ABOUT HEAVEN?

Four criteria are available to us in our pursuit of information regarding heaven. The first is science. This discipline has been defined to the point that there are those people who feel that whatever is scientific is true and whatever is outside the realm of physical science is not true. Because heaven lies outside the realm of observable data the scientific community is unable to speak to the subject with certainty. Science is able to tell us what happens to the body in the dissolution of its parts and their conversion into other forms, but its silence regarding a heaven has affected the thinking of many. They have come to reject the unseen spiritual world because of it.

Another source by which some have chosen to judge the matter of heaven is philosophy. This is unfortunate because human reason and logic deal with the world in which we live. Man is able to speculate, guess, conjecture, hypothesize,

but he is restricted to the limitations imposed by finite thinking. Man simply does not know all there is to know.

Two other available sources are Scripture and the words of Christ. What science cannot find and philosophy is unable to fathom, the Bible explains. Christians are people who believe that certitude regarding heaven comes by revelation. God has broken in upon man's inability to move in the area of spiritual realities and has communicated certain truth which He has caused to be written in a book. With science we have only unverified hypothesis and with philosophy we have man's speculation about what may be ahead. In the Bible we are left with no doubt about heaven's existence and men's experience of it. The Apostle Paul informed Thessalonian believers along these lines with the words, *"For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord."* (I Thessalonians 4:15) Jesus corrected the Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection, with the words, *"Ye do err, not knowing the Scriptures, not the power of God."* (Matthew 22:29) Ignorance regarding heaven abounds. The reason is because people have allowed their minds to be poisoned against the one source of information which speaks with integrity and authority about heaven. Realizing this, God has repeated again and again through Paul the fact that we need not be ignorant. (Romans 1:13; I Corinthians 10:1; 12:1; II Corinthians 1:8; I Thessalonians 4:13)

It has often been said that we cannot know about heaven because no one has ever gone there and returned to tell us about it. Christianity teaches there is one exception. That exception is Christ. This is the way He explained it, *"No man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of Man which is in heaven."* (John 20:17) Jesus is the only one who died, came alive again, and is alive forevermore. (Revelation 1:18) He is thus qualified to make His observations known to us. If we would know about heaven we must, therefore, learn from Him and those He taught. Otherwise we will have to content ourselves with living out our days insecure and hoping for the best. Do not allow anyone to discourage you from examining very seriously the information God has made available through His Word and His Son.

III. IS THERE A LITERAL HEAVEN?

The question is often asked if heaven is a place where there are lands, rivers, mountains, and the surroundings of life such as we experience in this world. The answer is probably not. In I Corinthians 2:9 St. Paul writes, *"...no mere man has ever seen, heard, or even imagined what wonderful things God has ready for those*

who love the lord." (TLB) Therefore, as surely as we have seen, heard, or touched things in this visible universe which are the objects of our senses, those things will not be constitutive elements in heaven.

The Bible describes the final and eternal heaven as a literal place. It is not to be thought of as some kind of intangible, immaterial, looking glass abode. It is spoken of as a city in Hebrews 11:16. "*But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for He hath prepared for them a city.*" In Hebrews 13:14 we read, "*For here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come.*" In Revelation 21:2 heaven is called "*the holy city*" and "*new Jerusalem.*" This description is certainly in keeping with Jesus promise in John 14:2, "*in my father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.*" The word mansions means abodes, a staying or abiding place. The heavenly dwelling is also called a place. Jesus is saying that there are many abiding places in His Father's house.

Heaven is also referred to as a country. "*For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country.*" (Hebrews 11:14) "*But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly.*" (Hebrews 11:16) Further, Peter refers to heaven as a place where an inheritance is made secure. (I. Peter 1:3-5) Treasures are lost here on earth and believers are therefore admonished to put them in a place of absolute safety. (Matthew 6:20-23) Heaven is described as a haven in contrast to the insecurity which marks life on earth. (Hebrews 11:8-9; Revelation 22:15). In Revelation 4:1-6 we have the indescribable place of God's presence. Revelation 7:9-17 the glorious abode of the worshipping redeemed is described. Revelation 14:1-5 describes the righteous realm of a faultless social order. Revelation 21:1-27 describes the cosmos in the full beauty of utter holiness. Revelation 22:1-5 describes the radiant setting for eternal life: full, free, and everlasting. These are descriptions of the final and eternal heaven. At the last, the "*heavenly Jerusalem*" will descend from heaven to earth which will have been made new, and will provide a perfect home for the redeemed of the Lord for eternity. (Hebrews 12:22; Galatians 4:26; Revelation 21:10-25) This heaven is not to be confused with the paradise or third heaven which now house the departed spirits of believers today. No believer has yet entered the final heaven. Although we may be somewhat limited in our knowledge of the exact nature of heaven, Scriptures are sufficient to render us confident that such a place exists. If words have meaning, notwithstanding symbolism and figures of speech, God has communicated the fact to us that heaven is a literal place.

IV. WHERE IS HEAVEN LOCATED?

Five heavens are mentioned in Scripture. First, there is the heaven which holds the clouds and from which the rain falls. This is the atmospheric heaven. It is mentioned in Acts 14:17 and Genesis 1:20. Another heaven is the huge region of the sun, moon, and stars as spoken of in Psalm 8:3-4. There is the *“third heaven”* mentioned in II Corinthians 12:2, II Chronicles 6:18; Nehemiah 9:6; Psalm 148:4. Here God's presence resides. To this place Jesus ascended. (Mark 16:9) Elijah also went to this heaven, (II Kings 2:11) as did Enoch. (Genesis 5:24) Rejoicing takes place here over repentance. (Luke 15:7)

In Ephesians 6:12 Paul speaks about a place where evil spirits dwell. He writes, *“For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.”* More correctly, it is *“wickedness in the heavens.”* This is not a physical heaven. Because it is the place of evil spirits, this heaven is spiritual in nature. The last heaven is the eternal home of God's people.

The Scripture gives the impression that the third heaven is somewhere *“up.”* We think of Christ as having ascended and descended. (Ephesians 4:10) Inasmuch as the earth continually rotates on its axis, *“up”* could mean in any direction. We may want to think of heaven as that place beyond the atmospheric heaven, unreachable by observation which is limited to the second heaven. The Russian cosmonaut didn't discover the heaven of Christianity because he doesn't realize the Bible speaks of a cosmological heaven and of a spiritual heaven. They are not perceived in the same way. There are many things which constitute reality which are not perceived with physical senses. For instance, this room is filled with many beautiful colors. They are right in front of our eyes. They are the colors which constitute light and the qualities of light. If we had a prism to see through, the light would take on its various characteristics and its colors right before our eyes. But, you see, our eyes alone are not equipped to see that reality. We may also think of the room as being filled with beautiful music. All we need is a radio receiver to hear what our ears are not capable in themselves of hearing. The Bible, in a sense, speaks of heaven in this way. In this form we cannot begin to experience this reality. Some people feel that the place of departed believers may be closer than we realize. It is well for us to guard against materialistic conceptions of the afterlife. There is a literal heaven although it is only as spirit is associated with the physical does it assume time and place identity. For instance, God is spirit. God is in heaven, yet God is everywhere. Hence, we are

not amiss to say that in some way God is everywhere also. (Luke 17:20) Heaven becomes a state or condition of existence.

V. WILL WE KNOW EACH OTHER IN HEAVEN?

Do we carry over into the afterlife social associations and identity? The Sadducees approached Jesus with the question of seven brothers who married one woman. (Mark 12:18-19) Surely, she could not have seven husbands in heaven. Jesus answered, that we shall be as the angels who, *“neither marry nor are given in marriage.”* (Mark 12:25) The Bible offers sufficient evidence that there will be recognition among the occupants of heaven. Old Testament people believed that when they left earth they would be reunited with loved ones gone beyond. (Genesis 25:8; 35:29; 49:33) A believing Jacob said about his son Joseph, *“I shall go down into Sheol unto my son mourning.”* (Genesis 37:25) David said of his dead son, *“I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.”* (II Samuel 12:23) The identity of Moses and Elijah (1350 B.C. and 870 B.C.) was unimpaired to Peter, James and John as they stood on the summit of a mountain. (Matthew 17:1-8)

Other Scriptures which teach the preservation of identity are found in Philippians 3:20; Hebrews 12:1; Matthew 17:3; Revelation 6:9,10; Romans 14:12; Luke 16:23; Revelation 6:9; I Thessalonians 4:13-18; Hebrew 13:17; Matthew 8:11; Ephesians 3:15.) There is little reason to doubt that the redeemed will know each other in heaven. I believe that one of the great thrills of heaven will be not only to continue friendships begun on earth, but to meet the outstanding believers of the ages. Paul reminds us that heaven is the home, the fatherland, of *“the whole family in heaven and earth.”* (Ephesians .3:15) What kind of a “home” would it be if its members are strangers to one another for eternity? *“Then shall I know even as I am also known,”* is the way Paul explained it. (I Corinthians 13:13)

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