

July 12 – Revelation 21:1 – 5, 11- 12, 22:1-2

What is Heaven Like?

Heaven, it is a subject of intense interest throughout our recorded faith history. Questions abound concerning what it will be like. Do our pets go to heaven? Pope Francis recently weighed in on this debate with an affirmative yes. Who gets in and who is excluded? What are the criteria for entrance? Will we see our loved ones again? Will we know them? What will we do for eternity? And so the questions go on. Pastors and theologians have been trying to answer those questions for centuries. Our earliest creeds try to begin to answer some of these questions. The Apostles Creed says, “Jesus ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of God.” Both it and the Nicene Creed affirm the belief in the resurrection of the dead and life everlasting.

With all of this intense interest and scrutiny a whole host of ideas have come to be held about what heaven is and isn't like, what happens at the time of our death and so on. People's near death experiences have added to this conversation. This has led to a jumble of thoughts and confusion about what to believe. Cheryle Bigelow asked me to weigh in on this topic. Now I won't be able to answer even a fraction of your questions or clear up all the muddle. Scholars better than I have been trying forever to do this. What I want to do is share a bit of what is and isn't in the Bible so you can be better informed. You may disagree with some of what I say. You will have the backing of scholars for your point of view. But mostly I want to give you a few words of hope that you can hang on to when you or a loved one walks through the valley of death.

One of the most common images of heaven is St. Peter sitting at the gates deciding who gets in and who goes to hell. That image evolved from a passage in the gospels that gives Peter the keys to the kingdom along with the passage from the Book of Revelation that talks about the gates of heaven. Nowhere do we find a reference that Peter will be found seated at the Pearly Gates judging those who die.

Now that I have bashed a favorite image let me go back and share a little of the theology of what happens after death, as found in the Bible. You might be surprised to learn that it changed over time. In the first part of the Old Testament there was no

concept of heaven as we know it. Instead all went to Sheol, a place of shadows. This was not a place of blessing or punishment, just where our spirits went. Following years of captivity in Persia, after the fall of Jerusalem, the ideas of heaven and hell begin to develop. This likely happened because these ideas were part of Persian religions. By the time of Jesus most believed in heaven, though the Sadducees did not since this idea wasn't found in the scriptures. With the resurrection of Jesus we have the belief of eternal life and bodily resurrection becoming one of the tenets of our faith, as seen in the creeds. But even in the New Testament there are different ideas about what life after death is like.

1. We die to sleep until we are resurrected. Then we experience heaven.
2. We die and are judged and go to heaven or hell.
3. We die and are judged and either enter into heaven or we go to purgatory. There we are given time to work on whatever is keeping us from heaven. There is a final judgment where we are given a second chance at heaven.

Now, I realize that none of these might be your understanding of eternal life. Many other theologies of life after death have evolved over the centuries. Among them: God forgives so all go to heaven, there is no such thing as hell so our experiences in this world shape our experiences after death (living in the presence of God when you were not faithful would be a hellish existence), and the transmigration of souls (our spirits remain intact but return in different forms). These and many more are held by people of faith but they are not Biblically based.

So what does the Bible say?

1. God is victorious over death. We are offered eternal life. Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life." Those who believe in me, even though they die, yet they shall live."
2. Heaven is real – Jesus says to his disciples "I go to prepare a place for you."
3. "Nothing not even death separates us from the love of God" so we know we will be with God.
4. Heaven is the place God most fully resides. In the Old Testament it is talked about as the throne room of God. In The Book of Revelation it talks about how God will be with us and Jesus is seated at the right hand of God.
5. It is the place from where the Holy Spirit comes. At Jesus' baptism we hear about the Spirit coming down out of heaven.

6. There the Christian will find his/her reward (Matt 5:12)
7. There is where we are to keep our lasting treasure (Matt 6:19-21)
8. It is the realm of joy and peace Luke 15:7 & 19:38
9. I Corinthians 15 talks not about resurrection of our same body but the giving of a new eternal body.

The Bible doesn't say that doing good things will put stars in our crown. As I said earlier, Peter is not the gatekeeper. It doesn't say we are sitting around on clouds playing harps. The Bible doesn't really answer questions such as will we see or know our loved ones, or do our pets go to heaven or some of the other questions we have. We are left with a lot of vagueness about what awaits us after we die.

I recall visiting with my dad a few weeks before he died. He had been a minister of the gospel for over 50 years. He knew he was dying. I asked him, "Dad, are you afraid to die?" His response shocked me. "No," he said, "Not afraid just curious." When he saw my confused look he smiled and said, "I have been telling people about life after death for decades. I am curious to see if I got it right!" There was no doubt in his mind that he would find eternal life. He was honest to admit that his interpretations might be skewed or wrong.

So what does this all mean for us? I hear it telling me three things. First, how we live and what we believe matters eternally. The Bible is very clear about this. I am not going to place myself in the position of being judge and decider of who gets in to heaven and who doesn't. It is clear that God alone holds that job. But the Bible does remind us that we are to be people of faith, integrity, and honesty. We are to care about others in need. Whether or not we have to be a Christian or even go to church, I leave up to God to decide if that is an important criteria for heaven. But I believe that God wants us to live as citizens of heaven today, being loving, forgiving and caring. This is our trial ground for tomorrow. So how we live matters.

Second. We will never know exactly what heaven is like this side of death. We won't get all of our questions answered. I believe less is better in a situation like this. The more we try to figure it out, pin our faith on certainties that have evolved over time

the shakier our faith foundation. Jesus could have told us exactly what heaven was like. He chose to leave us with the ambiguity, asking us to trust and live in faithful obedience.

Finally, the Bible does promise us that eternal life is a given. We can rest assured of that. We are promised that if we confess our sins, they are forgiven so we do not have to feel the need of carrying the burdens of past mistakes into the future. I hear people saying but what about.... Forgiveness is offered. Life is offered. So we can face our future unafraid.

I am a person who would like to know the facts. I want an image and a view of heaven to draw me forward. I am continually reminded to live in faith and live faithfully. Like my dad, I am curious if I am getting it right. But I believe the more I embrace the ambiguity of the Bible concerning heaven with the assurance of eternal life, the closer I am to the truth. May this idea give you comfort and reassurance.