

HEAVEN:
THE ETERNAL STATE OF THE RIGHTEOUS

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The concept of heaven is not one that is exclusive to Christianity or confined to a select few people groups. We find the remnants of heaven in a great many religions of both the past and present: Romans believed they were spirited off to Paradise on a fiery four-horse chariot¹, The Egyptians' elaborate burial preparations includes maps and equipment they believed were helpful in the afterlife. Mexicans, Peruvians, and Polynesians believed they went to the sun or the moon after death.² In our own mix of cultures, according to a recent poll by ABC News, 90% of Americans believe in the existence of heaven in some form or another.³ Evidence suggests, as Solomon proclaimed in his book on wisdom, that eternity is written on the hearts of all mankind (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

Unfortunately, the widespread belief in the concept of heaven has only led to the dilution of Christianity's unique proclamation of it. Within the contemporary Christian culture, heaven has become no more than an unending church service or a spiritual seat in the clouds; it is the removal of all the things we have come to cherish in this world, and thus deters us from deepening our faith. As John Eldridge writes, "[We think to ourselves:] 'That's it? That's the good news?' And then we sigh and feel guilty that we are not more 'spiritual'. We lose heart, and we turn once more to the present to find what [enjoyment in] life we can."⁴ In addition to the

¹ Barbara Walters, "Heaven -- Where Is It? How Do We Get There? - ABC News," December 20, 2005, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/Beliefs/story?id=1374010> (accessed March 16, 2010).

² Randy Alcorn, *Heaven*, First Edition. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2004), xiv.

³ Walters, "Heaven -- Where Is It? How Do We Get There? - ABC News."

⁴ Alcorn, *Heaven*, 6.

effects of culture on our understanding of heaven, Christians also often find themselves deterred from the subject by the mysterious nature of the end times. Those who begin their search for heaven in the realm of Eschatology often exhaust themselves trying to understand the proliferation of views and the mass collections of documents concerning the interpretation of Revelation, the timing of the Rapture, the events of the Tribulation, and the nature of the Millennium: a problem Joni Eareckson Tada appropriately names, “Chronological Chaos”.⁵

This short essay will attempt to set forth many accepted truths regarding heaven, the final state of Christians, in hope of allowing its readers to bypass the ‘chaos’ of the eschatological debates and see the great degree of unity that scholars share regarding our final state. It seeks to follow the spirit of Paul’s command to “Set your minds on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father,” (Colossians 3:1) by providing a starting place for Christians who wish to understand their final home. This essay will primarily seek to address three broad questions about heaven with specific Scriptural detail: (1) What will God’s final redemption of all things consist of? (2) What will life in heaven look like? and (3) How do our current actions affect the life to come?

God’s Redemption of All Things

Virtually all Christian scholars today would agree that God’s activity in the Scriptures is primarily focused on redemption: bringing the sinful back into a pure, sinless relationship with Him. While some have wrongly dismissed the material world as simply a vessel that God is using to purify the souls of mankind, Scripture makes it clear that God’s redemptive act includes His *entire* creation: material and immaterial. In the beginning, God’s created everything in the world “very good” and at the end of His work, it will again all be “very good”. Anything that God does not purify, He will have destroyed or cast into ‘the lake of fire’ outside the realm of His redeemed creation. This is precisely why the Scriptures talk repeatedly of a new earth in

⁵ Joni Eareckson Tada, *Heaven* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 15. Alcorn, *Heaven*, 8.

passages throughout the Old and New Testaments, particularly in: Isaiah 65:17, Matthew 19:28-29, 2 Peter 3:10-13, and Revelation 21:1-5. Our eternal dwelling place will be a reflection of the garden of Eden—not a celestial palace in the clouds, as contemporary culture would have us believe. Humans are physical *and* spiritual beings, and our eternal state will reflect both aspects of our nature. The only state in which we will exist apart from our bodies is in time between the death of our bodies and God’s resurrection of those bodies, when our souls reside with God in the present heaven.⁶

Like the garden of Eden, men and women will return to the new earth as it was originally created, without the effects of sin and complete with the tree of life. The world we see now is only a dim reflection of God’s creation, being spoiled by the same sin that has effected us, as Paul explains in Romans 8:20-22, “Against its will, all creation was subjected to God’s curse. But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God’s children in glorious freedom from death and decay. For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.” (NLT) As Randy Alcorn notes, if you want to picture heaven, start by looking around you and imagining what the world would be like without sin and death and suffering and corruption.⁷ Consider a world where all the animals of the earth are harmless, where food and water are plentiful, and where the weather never produces a devastating hurricane, earthquake, or tornado. Listen to the words of Isaiah as he reflects upon this glorious future:

Never again will one of her infants live just a few days or an old man die before his time. Indeed, no one will die before the age of a hundred, anyone who fails to reach the age of a hundred will be considered cursed. They will build houses and live in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build a house only to have another live in it, or plant a vineyard only to have another eat its fruit, for my people will live as long as trees, and my chosen ones will enjoy to the fullest

⁶ Randy Alcorn’s book devotes extensive attention to the nature of the “intermediate” heaven, which I will not detail here, but which is also very profitable for the edification of believers. See also: John Gilmore, *Probing Heaven: Key Questions on the Hereafter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Pub Group, 1989), 97-107.

⁷ Alcorn, *Heaven*, 17.

what they have produced. They will not work in vain, or give birth to children that will experience disaster. For the LORD will bless their children and their descendants. Before they even call out, I will respond; while they are still speaking, I will hear. A wolf and a lamb will graze together; a lion, like an ox, will eat straw, and a snake's food will be dirt. They will no longer injure or destroy on my entire royal mountain," says the LORD. ~ Isaiah 65:20-25

Like creation, we ourselves will be set free from sin, death, suffering, and corruption. In the latter half of Paul's Romans 8 declaration, he says that "we ourselves also, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we eagerly await our adoption, the redemption of our bodies." (v.23). Human beings and the earth are inseparably linked. Man was created from the earth, and man's fall caused the earth to fall subject to sin. They were subjected to the curse together, and together they shall be free from it.⁸ On the new earth, we will have new bodies, reflecting the body that Christ was raised in at his resurrection; bodies that no longer suffer from sickness, disabilities, cancer, or corrupt genetics; bodies that can laugh and run and think without hindrance.

In contrast to the garden of Eden, however, the new earth will be superior to the previous creation in one major way. In many passages, the redemption of creation is described as *a new heavens and a new earth*, and with good reason. Though heavens can represent the atmosphere of the earth, it is also used to refer to the dwelling place of God throughout Scripture (Isaiah 66:1, Matt 6:9, 1 Peter 3:22, 1 Kings 8:30).⁹ Rather than being a place where God visited Adam and Eve periodically like in the garden of Eden, the new earth will be the place that qualifies as heaven too, because it will be a place where God dwells! In Revelation John proclaims "I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: "Look! The residence of God is among human beings. He will live among them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be

⁸ Ibid., 121.

⁹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Zondervan, 1995), 1135.
Charles Ferguson Ball, *Heaven* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1980), 27-28.

with them.” The new earth is rightly called “heaven” as well.¹⁰ As the crescendo of God’s redemptive work, God will make his dwelling place among us. God has made Himself present upon the earth in many forms in the past: in a cloud, in the appearance of an angel, and in the incarnate Christ, but in the future God will be fully present among us in a way that has no parallel. His very presence will provide light for the earth.

God’s dwelling place on the new earth will also be a unique feature of heaven, because it is a city of His own creation, which Revelation describes coming down out of heaven as the new Jerusalem. While many have had a hard time reconciling the description of this heavenly city with the laws and physical makeup of the present world, many of its aspects are clearly significant to us. First, it is pictured as incredibly large, a place where all of God’s redeemed humanity could potentially dwell, if desired. Second, it memorializes God’s redemptive work on the old earth through its architecture: foundations and gates that reflect Israel’s tribes and the apostles of the New Testament. And third, it is void of one significant feature: the temple.

Finally—also in contrast to the garden of Eden, the new earth will also have one additional exclusion: the presence of a tempter. Satan, as we mentioned before as part of the unredeemed creation, will have been cast forever into the lake of fire. Life will exist without the presence of sinful spiritual beings as well. Grace, peace, and truth, will reign forever in our eternal home.

Life in Heaven

Many of the questions and concerns that deter people from looking forward to heaven concern our behavior there. As already cited, many people cannot see much more than an endless worship service, since many of Scriptures glimpses into the present heaven involve angels or

¹⁰ Donald G. Bloesch, *The Last Things: Resurrection, Judgment, Glory* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 229. Alcorn, *Heaven*, 45.

elders endlessly worshipping God. While the previous discussion comparing the nature of Heaven to the garden of Eden is a helpful premise to help people begin to think of our eternal state differently than the state of spirits in the present heaven, there is much more to be considered. If a redeemed earth is to be the ultimate goal of God's plan from the foundation of His creation, than there must be much more to our new home than we tend to imagine. As A. A. Hodge says so eloquently,

Heaven, as the eternal home of the divine Man and of all the redeemed members of the human race, must necessarily be thoroughly human in its structure, conditions, and activities. Its joys and activities must all be rational, moral, emotional, voluntary, and active. There must be an exercise of all the faculties, the gratification of all tastes, the development of all talent capacities, the realization of all ideals. The reason, the intellectual curiosity, the imagination, the aesthetic instincts, the holy affections, the social affinities, the inexhaustible resources of strength and power native to the human soul must all find in heaven, exercise and satisfaction.¹¹

In pursuit of a better perspective on our lives in heaven, this section will attempt to address the concerns of our sense of time, identity, and responsibility in our eternal state.

One of the great arguments for an entirely non-physical heaven has been the difficulty of understanding how physical things can exist eternally. Even now it is a stumbling block for many as they try to reconcile the “normal” aging processes of mankind with the eternal picture of heaven. Scholars have postulated different theories regarding the eternal existence of mankind in an attempt to explain this difficult subject. Gilmore, in his book *Probing Heaven*, describes the three main lines of thought concerning time in heaven: that the earth will exist outside of time, that the earth will exist in an endless span of time, or that the earth will exist in a state of absolute present, a state he connects to Albert Einstein's theory of Absolute Speed Limits.¹² While the advancement of science may shed light upon the exact nature of our eternal state, we should not be deterred by the challenges of visualizing the existence of a world that exists much like the

¹¹ Ibid., 97-98.

¹² Gilmore, *Probing Heaven*, 154.

present one, but without wearing out, since the testimony of Scripture again refers us back to a garden of Eden as our model for the future. At the creation of the world Adam and Eve were expected to live forever, and creation was prepared to exist continually. The tree of life was given to them for this specific purpose. Even after the fall of Adam and Eve, Scripture records men and women who lived almost 1,000 years. If these men and women lived lives double, triple, or even ten times what we do now on our present world, then we should not be deterred in thinking that a fully redeemed earth can support life without wearing it out. Our new earth should not be much different from this old one. After all, the tree of life will be present upon the new earth as well. Finally, we must be sensitive to the portrayal of the new earth as a place where time does seem to pass: rivers flow, music is played, and the tree of life bears fruit “every month”.¹³ Whatever this new reality entails, we have no need to think of it in terms that are too far divorced from the things we imagine when we read the first chapters of Genesis.

One of the more emotional subjects that is encountered when considering Heaven is the identity of the individual: their memories of this life, their relationship to others, and their personality. Several elements of Scripture contribute to a sense that believers will lose their identity in their final state: Firstly, Jesus in his resurrected state was not immediately recognized by many people after his resurrection: by the women at the tomb, by the men on the road to Emmaus, and by the disciples on their fishing trip. Secondly, God gives us new names in heaven (Isaiah 62:2, 65:15; Revelation 2:17, 3:12). Thirdly, Jesus makes a comment in the New Testament that we will not marry in heaven, but will “become like the angels” (Matthew 22:30). Finally, God promises to wipe every tear from our eyes and cause the former things to cease to exist (Isaiah 65:17, Revelation 21:4).

While these are genuine concerns for anyone who reads the pages of Scripture, they do not appear to be the implications of any of the texts mentioned above. Firstly, Jesus’ slow

¹³ Alcorn, *Heaven*, 259.

recognition by others is likely a product of cultural standards that would have kept the women at the tomb from looking a man in the eye, his divine intention to remain anonymous while on the Emmaus road, and the distance at which Jesus appeared to his disciples on their fishing trip. Secondly, as Scripture makes clear in the Old and New Testaments, God's giving of a new name does not nullify the old name or old identity that a person might have carried. For example, Jacob is renamed Israel by God, but Scripture continues to use both names. Also, the names of the apostles and the twelve tribes of Israel are engraved upon the new city, earthly names, as far as we know. Thirdly, Jesus' mention of the likeness that will exist between humans and angels cannot reference an exact likeness, for in the visions of the new heaven and new earth there are still distinctions made between angels and humans. God's creation is not meant to dilute our individual uniqueness, but rather to purify it. As far as we know, that means our human form will be much the same as it is now, and to be human is to have a gender¹⁴. Christ, Himself, still appeared as a man after He was resurrected, in the same likeness as He was known upon the earth, as a testimony to the change we can expect in our resurrection. And finally, though some experiences in the sinful world scare both the body and soul beyond healing, it does not appear likely that God's means of removing sorrow and tears will be to cause us to forget the past entirely, but rather that in Heaven His presence will heal these wounds and the beauty of our new home will cause our reasons for sadness never to seize us again.

Randy Alcorn, in his treatment on the subject of personal identity, chooses to focus on the "principle of redemptive continuity," which is God's way of restoring to purity what has been corrupted, rather than starting again from a blank state. Just as the world was purged by water and renewed, it will be purged by fire and renewed. Just as Jesus redeemed a corrupted humanity instead of creating a new one, He will redeem the world, rather than creating a new one. Randy also appeals to our present redemption as an example of this, explaining that, "when

¹⁴ Ibid., 274-290.

I came to Christ as a high school student, I became a new person, yet I was still the same person I had always been... This same Randy will undergo another change at death, and yet another change at the resurrection of the dead. But through all the changes I will still be who I was and who I am.” Other clear evidence of the continuity of our identity is reflected in our resurrection bodies. Jesus’ empty tomb and demonstration of his wounds before the disciples is evidence that God chose to resurrect his old body. Christ’s new body was made from the same one he left behind at death.¹⁵

In regard to our lives in heaven, it is important to reflect upon our uniqueness as a gift that God has endowed us with:

Just as our genetic code and fingerprints are unique now, we should expect the same of our new bodies... God is the creator of individual identities and personalities. He makes no two snowflakes, much less two people, alike. Not even ‘identical twins’ are identical... What makes you *you*? It’s not only your body but also your memory, personality, traits gifts, passions, preferences, and interests. In the final resurrection, I believe all of these facts will be restored and amplified, untarnished by sin and the curse.¹⁶

It would not seem that God would wish to stifle his creativity in the final state any more than He has chosen to limit it now.¹⁷ Heaven, of course, is a place for us to live more fully than we live now. Here and now we are hindered by the sinful nature in both our own lives and in our relationship to others. In Heaven we will no longer need to question another persons’ truthfulness or trustworthiness (or our own), for the deceiver and the deceiving nature will have both been removed entirely from the world. Heaven will be a place where we will pick up relationships where they left off. Husband and wife, father and son, pastor and parishioner will surely relate differently as God takes on a physical presence among us and our marriage is to Christ, but these things will only enhance our lives, rather than hinder them.

¹⁵ Ibid., 112-114.

¹⁶ Ibid., 274.

¹⁷ Ball, *Heaven*, 56-57.

The only part of our identity that remains ambiguous from Scripture is the age at which everyone will appear. It is unclear whether children or elders will continue to mature or whether all will find themselves instantly at an age of optimal life. Scripture says very little about this, and so commentators have found reason to remain silent as well.

Present Actions that Affect the Future

One of the most important concepts for believers to grasp as it pertains to heaven is way in which our present actions affect our future lives in Heaven. The counsel of the entire Word of God declares with perfect clarity that every man is without hope of right standing before God apart from God's grace—a doctrine of first importance for every person to understand. For the unbeliever, this is the pathway to Christ, and for the believer, it is the message they must live and share with every tribe, tongue and nation. However, as believers, it is of utmost importance for us to realize that our lives *after* salvation in Christ also contribute to our future state in Heaven. As Charles Ferguson Ball states so eloquently in his book on heaven:

While it is true that no inducement can generate enough merit to insure our reaching heaven by worthy efforts, and while it is true that without deserving it we are saved through God's grace alone, yet repeatedly God promises rewards to His children for deeds done in the body.¹⁸

While much can be said of this topic, it is important for us to look at the two key eschatological themes of judgment and stewardship in the Scriptures, to gain a clear understanding of the doctrine of rewards in Heaven.

The theme of judgment is often over-simplified into a simple appearance before the throne of God in contemporary culture, but Scripture's account of judgment consists of far more than that. For Scripture speaks of two judgments for all mankind: the judgment of faith and the judgment of works.¹⁹ The judgment of faith is an event where God will sort out the believing

¹⁸ Ibid., 71.

¹⁹ Alcorn, *Heaven*, 47.

from the unbelieving, based on their faith in Christ. This judgment is reflected in the analogy of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, the parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16, the words of Jesus to the thief on the cross in Luke 23, the foundation of believers lives in 1 Corinthians 3, the book of Life in Revelation 20, and the numerous conversations regarding the kingdom of God by Jesus in the gospels. As we mentioned before, this is the judgment that matters the most for the world. As P.T. Forsyth once said, “The great sin is not something we do, but it is refusing to make ourselves right with God in Christ's Cross. We are judged in the end by our relation to the Cross of Christ.”²⁰

The judgment of works is an event or a set of events (one for believers and one for unbelievers) where God will confirm the condemnation of the unbelieving world by revealing their evil deeds and reward individual believers for their stewardship of His grace on the earth. Scripture often pictures the judgment of works alongside the judgment of faith, as it is found in Christ's comments regarding the works of those at judgment in Matthew 25, and in the presence of the books that accompany the book of Life in Revelation 20. For unbelievers, the Scripture interchanges the two judgments periodically, indicating that their deeds and their lack of grace will both reflect reasons for their condemnation to punishment, as Revelation emphasizes:

And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne. Then books were opened, and another book was opened - the book of life. So the dead were judged by what was written in the books, *according to their deeds*...If anyone's name was not found written *in the book of life*, that person was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:12-15)

As Paul summarized in his letter to the Corinthians believers, “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be paid back according to what he has done while in the body, whether good or evil.” (2 Corinthians 5:10).

In the case of believers, however, our good works are not to be related to our salvation, which we have already emphasized as by grace alone. Rather, our good works are

²⁰ Bloesch, *The Last Things*, 217-218.

cited at a time of judgment as evidence of God's outpouring a grace into our lives. Though it can be difficult to distinguish grace and good works in Jesus's statements regarding judgment in Matthew 20, it is made clear in many other places in Scripture, most notably in 1 Corinthians 3:9-15, where Paul uses the analogy of a building to describe the foundation of our salvation through Christ Jesus in contrast to the rest of the building, which is the result of our works. Clearly here Paul shows us that anyone with the foundation of faith in Christ will be saved during the time of judgment (which he calls "the Day"), but that some will also receive rewards for their ability to build precious things upon the foundation of Jesus Christ. Paul also appeals to this judgment when he condemns believers for judging other Christian's behavior in Romans 14:2-12 and in 1 Corinthians 4:1-5, explaining that believers should not judge one another's convictions because "we will all stand before the judgment seat of God" and that "each of us will give an account of ourselves to God" with the result that "He will bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the motives of hearts. Then each one will receive recognition from God."²¹

In addition to these passages concerning judgment, the mention of rewards for the believer's stewardship of God's grace is found throughout the New Testament writings to communities of faith in the first century as part of the writer's exhortation to live godly lives. We have already seen in Paul's letter to the Corinthians that our works are reason for "recognition from God". In Joni Eareckson Tada's book, she prefers the translation "praise from God," citing it as emphasis upon the fact that our sinful works have been covered by the blood of Christ, and that the judgment of works for believers is thus a time of reflection upon the good works we have done, rather than a humbling recollection of our struggles with the flesh.²² As it is stated in the

²¹ Romans 14:10, Romans 14:12, and 1 Corinthians 4:5, respectively.

²² Tada, *Heaven*, 56-60.

book, The Last Things, “We are accepted into heaven on the basis of faith alone, but we are adorned in heaven on the basis of the fruits of our faith.”²³

What exactly is the adornment we will receive in heaven? That is subject to much debate. Many persist in arguments that Heaven is enough reward for everyone. Other speak of the occurrences of the word “crown” in the New Testament as a physical symbol of specific qualities of the heart. Many see the task of ruling in the millennial kingdom or on the new earth as reward for our faithfulness. Still others see our reward as God’s assignment of special prestigious responsibilities on the new earth, based upon the parables of Jesus regarding stewardship.²⁴ While these arguments are insightful and should be considered, the true nature of our reward may not be something that has been revealed entirely to us at this time. What is clear regarding rewards is that God will judge the motives of the heart as much as our actions, and that He will consider faithfulness throughout the end of our lives to be a significant achievement (2 Timothy 2:12; Revelation 2:26-28, 3:10). He has commanded us to “store up our treasures in heaven” (Matthew 6:19-20) and that in whatever we do, to “work at it with all your heart, as to the Lord and not for people, because you know that you will receive your inheritance from the Lord as the reward.” (Colossians 3:23-25). Our reward is “an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison” (2 Corinthians 4:17).

Conclusion

As we began this essay, it was my expectation to follow in the command of Paul to “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.” (Colossians 3:2). This essay sought to answer three questions about heaven in detail: (1) What will God’s final redemption of all things consist of? (2) What will life in heaven look like? and (3) How do our current actions affect the

²³ Bloesch, *The Last Things*, 230.

²⁴ Crowns and ruling roles appear in Luke 19:17, 1 Corinthians 6:2-3, 2 Timothy 2:12 and Revelation 2:10, 2:26-28, 3:11, 3:21, 5:9-10 and heavenly responsibilities are drawn from the parable of the talents in Matthew 25 and in Luke 16. Alcorn, *Heaven*, 47, 208, 212, 226-227.

life to come? It is my hope that in addressing these questions in brief you might find yourself thinking of heaven not as an endless church service, but as Charles Spurgeon did, as the “goal of your desires and the summit of your wishes”.²⁵ That you might anticipate heaven with eagerness, you might be willing to suffer in this life for the sake of the next, and that you might consider heaven your home, rather than attempting to make this earth home.

Finally, remember that Heaven too, is one of God’s mysteries that He has chosen to reveal *in part* to mankind. God is among many things, one who loves to surprise us with the unexpected: with talking donkeys, unique animal life, one-of-a-kind people, and the unique life of the Messiah. By His partial revelation of this blessed eternal state, God desires for us to anticipate the future in a way that provides hope and motivation for the present. The Scripture declares that “no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him—but God has revealed it to us by His Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 2:9) Though we are dimly aware of the magnitude of a world without sin, it is likely beyond all imagining. Though we are dimly aware of what our cities look like, God’s city is likely beyond what can be pictured. We must be careful not to make our speculation into a concrete expectation, but rather to await with the eager anticipation of a child the full revelation of what God has prepared for us in Heaven.

²⁵ Ibid., 7.

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