

Defining Heaven

We talk a great deal about heaven. We look forward to spending eternity in heaven. We sometimes sing the popular chorus that says, “Heaven is a wonderful place, filled with glory and grace.” But most of us know very little about heaven.

If you read some theology textbooks you would find that most theologians don’t know a great deal about heaven, either. One well-known theologian devotes a total of two pages to the teaching of the theology of heaven and 87 pages to the subject of eternal punishment. We have a bit of an imbalance there!

That seems to be typical. So I would like for us to look at what the Bible says about heaven. Let’s begin with some definitions regarding heaven.

The Bible was not originally written in English. It was written primarily in Hebrew and Greek. Most of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew; the New Testament, except for a few words here and there, was basically written in Greek. Some of the words in those languages have been translated with the English word heaven. The Hebrew word *samayim* means “heaved up things” or “the heights”. The Greek word *ouranos* means “sky” or “air”. But it depends how the word is used. These secular definitions don’t help us a great deal.

Biblical references have been put together into three categories by Bible students and theologians referring to the first heaven, the second heaven and the third heaven. The first heaven is what we call the atmospheric heaven. It refers to what we can see outside—the sky and the clouds. The Bible frequently uses the word “heaven” to refer to the atmosphere that is around the planet earth. For example, Deuteronomy 11:11 refers to the “rain from heaven.” That’s talking about the atmosphere around us. Proverbs 23:5 speaks about the eagles that fly in the heaven. That’s talking about flying through the atmosphere. And Genesis 1:1 says that “God created the heavens and the earth.” This

distinguishes between the stuff we stand on and the atmosphere around us.

The second heaven refers to the celestial heavens. Sometimes it appears in plural form meaning that area in outer space where there are stars, the sun and moon and the other planets. Genesis 15:5 refers to the stars in the heavens. Deuteronomy 1:10 states, “*The Lord your God has increased your numbers so that today you are as many as the stars in the sky.*” Here we have moved a step from atmosphere to outer space.

Then there is the third heaven. We might call it the divine heaven. Jesus said in Matthew 28:18, “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*” He was distinguishing between the divine heaven and the physical earth as we think of it. In Mark 1:11, the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry, these words are recorded at Jesus’ baptism: “*And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”*”

The Bible does not enumerate the first and second heaven, although Paul refers to being “*caught up to the third heaven*” in 2 Corinthians 12:2. It seems a safe assumption that if there’s a third heaven then there are also a first and a second heaven.

Suffice it to say that “heaven” generally means that which is above. It may mean physically above like the atmospheric and celestial heavens or morally and

spiritually above such as the divine heaven.

Probably we are more concerned about the essence of heaven (and most specifically, the essence of the third heaven) than we are about just the definition of the word. This is the place that is promised to believers and is the residence of God. In fact, the essence of the third heaven can simply be defined as the abode of God, the residence of God. It is where God lives. That’s what makes the divine heaven what it is.

In Isaiah 57:15 we read, “*For this is what the high and lofty One says—he who lives forever,*

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whose name is holy: “I live in a high and holy place” That’s where God lives in heaven. The Old Testament refers to “*Jehovah, the God of heaven*”, referring to the place where God lives. In Acts 7:48-49 we read, “. . . *the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says: ‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool.’*” God’s throne is in heaven. And in Exodus 20:22 God speaks and says, “*I have spoken to you from heaven.*”

But those who know enough about theology understand that one of the basic attributes of God is that God is omnipresent. He is in all places. He’s everywhere. So, how can God be in heaven and someplace else at the same time? When Solomon was dedicating the temple in Jerusalem he asked in 1 Kings 8:27, “. . . *will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!*” If God can’t be contained in heaven, then how can we say that’s where he lives? Maybe you’re more familiar with what the psalmist wrote in Psalm 139:7-8: “*Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.*”

So, how can we say that heaven is a place where God lives? If God can be found in heaven, on earth, in hell, everywhere and if God is all places at all times then how does that definition work?

God is very different than we are. Because of that it’s hard to come up with adequate explanations. But there are some comparisons that we can make. Rough as they are they can help us to understand all of this, at least somewhat.

The sun is 93 million miles away from the earth, yet the light and energy of the sun are everywhere on the earth and in space, too. They are both places at the same time, but in a different way. Sunlight isn’t here in the same way that it’s in space. We should be thankful because otherwise we would be cooked by the sun.

So, God manifests himself in different ways in different places. The same God manifests himself as a terrible judge against sin before a sinful nation and as a merciful and forgiving friend before a penitent sinner.

When I am in different places with different people I’m seen differently by them. If I visit my ophthalmologist, he sees me as an eye. When I

visit the dentist, I am a tooth. When I talk to people who are hurt or troubled, I’m a counselor. When I’m with my neighbors, I’m a lawn mower. To the gas station attendant, I’m a car. They see me in different ways. But there is one place where I can be fully and naturally me--at home!

God is in lots of places and assumes different ways and different roles. But the one place where God can be himself, where God’s full glory can be revealed, is heaven. It is the one place where God can fully exhibit his holiness and justice without destroying all around him. It is the one place where God can fellowship with those who have not sin! Heaven is God’s home! And while it is true that God is absolutely everywhere at the same time, God is nowhere as fully revealed as himself as he is in heaven.

A third aspect of the definition of heaven, according to biblical teaching, is that it is an actual place. Heaven is a literal, physical, tangible place. Heaven is not an idea. It’s not just a condition, a feeling or a relationship. That is substantiated by biblical teaching. For example, in John 14:2-3 Jesus said:

In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

Or perhaps you recall when Jesus ascended up into heaven. The record of that is in the opening verses of the history of Acts. As the disciples watched Jesus ascend into heaven an angel appeared to them and said in Acts 1:11-12, “*Men of Galilee . . . why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.*”

Now remember, in that period of time between Jesus’ resurrection and ascension he had a physical body. His disciples could touch him. He ate with them. He talked with them. He was physically, literally, actually there. Now the promise is that he’ll come back in the same way. So the only conclusion we can have is that a physical Jesus must have gone to a physical, actual place— heaven. Likewise, when we read the fourth chapter of the book of Revelation, the chapter that deals

with heaven, we find there again that heaven is described as a physical place.

While the Bible, on the one hand, teaches that heaven is a real place, on the other hand, the Bible is rather secretive about the location of heaven. The location of heaven is unrevealed.

Do you remember some years ago when Soviet cosmonaut Gherman Titov circled the earth 17 times and said that he “looked into space and did not see God”? I wish he had asked me. I would have told him he wasn’t going to see God. And he didn’t see heaven, either. God has kept the location of heaven a secret.

The biblical description of “up” need not be misconstrued to say that the Bible teaches a flat earth and universe. The Bible communicates ideas in simple ordinary language that ordinary people understood, not in scientific terminology. We frequently use the same type of language. For example, we could watch a plane take off from the airport and say that the plane went up into the sky. Twelve hours later, when the world has spun around 180 degrees, would we then say that another plane has gone down into the sky? Of course not! So when the Bible refers to heaven as being “up” that is not coming across with a flat-earth unscientific approach. It’s simply using what is called phenomenal logical language. It is recognizing the way things are and using descriptive language to communicate that.

Heaven is sometimes misconstrued to be very distant. In fact, it may be closer than we think. For example, the room which you are in is filled with the sights and sounds of radio and TV signals. We do not experience them unless we are properly tuned receivers. Nevertheless, they are very much here. In the same way, heaven may be a very close place which we are not yet tuned to receive.

You may remember the Old Testament story of Elisha and his servant just before a massive battle between the Israelites and the Syrians. The servant couldn’t understand how Elisha could be so calm when it was obvious that there was about to be a slaughter and he would be part of it. In 2 Kings 6:16

we read that Elisha told him, “*Don’t be afraid . . . Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.*” Then Elisha prayed and said:

“O Lord, open his eyes so he may see.” Then the Lord opened the servants eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

They were actually, literally there. They were supernatural beings, but he couldn’t see them because he wasn’t equipped to see them. Never assume that those things which we cannot see do not exist! The point here is that heaven’s location is not known, but perhaps heaven’s location is very near.

Maybe that’s not enough for you. You want more. You want a concrete definition that you can write down on a piece of paper. I’m not sure we can do that. The fact is that an adequate description of heaven couldn’t be com-

prehended by our mortal minds. We wouldn’t understand it if we heard it. There are relatively few recorded instances of people who have been to heaven and have then walked this earth in a normal life. And the reports of what it is like are skimpy at best. When the apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians he describes the visit of a man to heaven. A lot of people think Paul was talking about himself. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 12, “*I know a man in Christ who . . . was caught up to the third heaven . . . He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.*”

Paul also wrote something that is important to us because someday we will experience what that man who went to heaven experienced when he wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:12, “*Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.*”

Some years ago an orphan boy was cared for by a vile and cruel old woman who misused and hurt him. She made him beg and steal money. He was underfed and beaten. One of his few pleasures in life was looking at the toys in the store window. He could look, but never touch. He never had any toys of his own!

Never assume that those things which we cannot see do not exist!

One day he was struck by a car and was taken to a charity hospital. There, for the first time in his life, he was loved. Each day he was cared for by smiling nurses who called him by name and were really concerned about him. For the first time in his life he slept on clean sheets and in a warm bed. He began to watch the other children around him in the ward playing with toys like the ones in the window of the store.

When he had enough strength to sit up in bed he saw a group of toy soldiers within his reach. With hesitation he reached out to touch them and with surprise and joy in his voice he cried out, “There isn’t any glass between! No glass between!”

And so it shall be for us who belong to Jesus Christ. One day we will be in heaven and there will no longer be any glass between!

St. Paul put it this way: “*Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.*”

What a grand and glorious day it will be when there will be no glass between us and Jesus Christ!

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