

## *Sneak Preview of Heaven • Luke 9:28-36*

One of the early Soviet cosmonauts insisted that neither God nor heaven existed. He said that when he rocketed above the earth and into orbit he looked for heaven and it was not there. Other critics insist that the Bible teaches an outdated cosmology with a three-story universe—heaven above, hell below and earth in-between. It is even considered primitive to say someone died and went *up* to heaven. After all, which way is *up* and which way is *down* on a round earth? What is *up* for us may be *down* for the people of China. It all just doesn't make much sense.

What people fail to understand is that the Bible is a book that was written in human language using ordinary human expressions. This is the way we talk. For example, in the United States we frequently refer to *up north*, *down south*, *back east* or *out west*. If you are not from the east it's not *back* anywhere as far as you are concerned. People who live in California probably don't think they are *out* of anywhere. If you were born and raised in Minnesota you probably don't think of Minnesota as being *up north*. And it gets even more confusing if you're from the Twin Cities because the Twin Cities are in southern Minnesota so you're *up north* in Minnesota and *down south* in the Twin Cities. It can all become very contradictory.

When Charleen and I were in Australia we discovered that Australians resent having their country referred to as being *down under*. *Down under* what? In fact, most Australian gift shops sell maps of the world with Australia on the top and the United States and Europe on the bottom.

In other words, *up* and *down*, *back* and *out*, *north* and *south*, *east* and *west* are all matters of relationship. They all depend on where you are and where you are talking about.

The same may be said about heaven. What makes it heaven is relationship, not whether it is

*up* or *down*. It's about where a person is and in what direction a person is headed. I suppose we could summarize the theology of heaven by saying that heaven is someplace else. It is the home of God. Or perhaps the simplest definition of heaven is that it is where Christians are not now but someday will be. Heaven is where Jesus came from and where we all want to end up.

For such an important place the Bible says surprisingly little about heaven, but we are given a very quick preview in Luke 9:28-36. It is a glimpse not unlike a flash picture taken in a totally darkened room. For an instant you feel as if you can see everything but it is quickly gone. You like what you saw but you wish you could see more. What we have here is a preview of heaven that is tied to a glimpse of the glory of Jesus Christ. It happened one day when Jesus . . .

*. . . took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem.*

What happened that day on that mountaintop was surprising and shocking. Peter, James and John were already impressed with Jesus. They had heard his amazing words and

seen him perform spectacular miracles, but nothing could have prepared them for what they saw that day. It was almost as if Jesus had been wearing a disguise and then, for that fleeting moment, he had taken off the disguise so they could see what he was really like. The Son of Man had come to earth and taken on humanity. He wore our skin

*...perhaps the simplest definition of heaven is that it is where Christians are not now but someday will be.*

and our clothes and looked just like us. But that day on that mountain he showed the way he looks in heaven.

Jesus' face looked different. Matthew's biography of Jesus in Matthew 17:2 says Jesus' "*face shone like the sun.*" The change was startling. It was still Jesus. They recognized him. But they saw him as they had never seen him before.

Jesus' clothes became as bright as a flash of lightening. Imagine standing six feet away from a strike of lightening and staring right at it. Not for a split second but for minutes. Brighter than anything you have ever seen before—so bright that the brilliance burns its image into your eyes and onto the screen of your brain. Mark writes in his biography of Jesus in Mark 9:3, "*His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.*"

It's hard to imagine an ordinary human comparison. Think of a woman living in your apartment building. Each time you've seen her she has been bundled up in heavy winter clothes. When you first met her she was changing a flat tire and there was thick black dirt on her hands and clothes and face. Then one day you see her on television. Instead of grease she has make-up on her face. Instead of winter work clothes she has on an expensive designer dress. Instead of living in the apartment down the hall she is the CEO and majority shareholder of the company that owns the apartment building and many others like it. She is on television to announce her acceptance of the President's nomination as Ambassador to the Court of St. James in London. You thought she was a nice neighbor but you never dreamed she was so much more.

Or think of the boy down the street who used to deliver your newspapers. The one you tipped \$5 at Christmastime. The one you haven't seen for years. You liked him but doubted he would ever amount to anything. Now it is the day of your surgery and you are pleased that the doctor is renowned as one of the best in the field. As he walks into your hospital room he seems vaguely familiar. He introduces himself as your former paperboy from down the street. You are shocked. You see the resemblance and recognize his voice.

It is hard to imagine he is the same person. You wish you had tipped him \$50 instead of \$5.

But those comparisons really aren't good enough. Imagine striking a match and a fireball erupts. Imagine turning on a light switch and a nuclear explosion blasts out before your eyes.

No, none of the comparisons is good enough because nothing compares. These men saw Jesus as they had never seen him before and as they would never see him again until the day he would welcome them directly into heaven. They had previewed heaven!

There is a point here that we dare not miss. We are not the center of heaven—Jesus is! The essence of heaven is not happiness or luxury or environmental perfection—it is Jesus! Jesus is what heaven is all about. That is one of the many reasons why heaven is just for Christians. Anyone who is not in love with Jesus, anyone who is not centered on Jesus, anyone who is not completely devoted to Jesus might not find heaven to be such a wonderful experience after all. When we think of heaven, most of all we should think of the glory of Jesus Christ.

But there are other bits of preview for us to see. Heaven is not merely the domain of God. Heaven includes others - - - like Moses and Elijah. They were apparently there to meet and talk to Jesus because they represented the Old Testament Law and Prophets. They were there to endorse Jesus and what he was on earth to do.

These others in heaven will be like Jesus. Moses and Elijah also "*appeared in glorious splendor*". They, too, were brilliantly bright but they were also recognizable. Even though they were glorious they were still themselves. They still had their names. They still had their voices. There was enough physical similarity that they could be recognized.

The topic of their conversation was Jesus' crucifixion, death and resurrection. The record says, "*They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem.*" This is a reference to the turning point in Jesus' life when he heads for Jerusalem where he is destined to die for human sin and arise for eternal life.

All of this hints at what we may expect to experience in heaven. We will be ourselves. We will recognize each other. We will talk to each other with our same voices. We will use our names. Future life will be directly connected to present life. We will be like Jesus. We'll be different. We will be glorious. We will be brilliant. We will be supernatural.

The central theme of heaven will be Jesus Christ and what he has done for us. It's not that we won't discuss other topics, but what will be central and what heaven will be all about is the glory of Jesus Christ.

The sneak preview of heaven was difficult for humans to understand. For unexplained reasons Peter, John and James were sleepy. Maybe they had been up late the night before. Maybe they were bored. Maybe praying made them tired. They were awakened with a shock when they saw Jesus, Moses and Elijah. They were like deer caught in the high beams of car headlights—wide-awake and frozen in place.

Peter was the disciple with the motor mouth. There is usually one in every group. They have to say something even when they don't have anything appropriate to say. As Moses and Elijah were leaving and Jesus' appearance was returning to the way it used to be, Peter blurted out, "*Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.*"

It's hard to figure out what Peter had on his mind. He offered to scrounge up branches and leaves or whatever was available and construct a lean-to for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah. Did he want to mark the spot? Did he think they would stay longer if they had a pup tent to call home? Did he miss the entire point of what had just happened? Was he just stupid?

Have you ever said something really stupid at a very important moment? (I have, but I'm not going to tell you about it!) Luke added his own observation in verse 33: "*He did not know what*

*he was saying.*" That's a kind way of saying Peter put his foot in his mouth.

Here is what I think really happened to Peter and it probably would have happened to us. This preview of heaven and the glory of Jesus was so amazing that he just had no category in his mind to deal with it. He didn't know what to say or think. He didn't know how to respond or how to behave. It was too new, too big, too good and too wonderful.

There are no human words or actions that fit something like this. Maybe that's why the Bible says so little about what heaven is like. We wouldn't understand it even if we were told. Whatever our wildest imagination of God's heaven may be, our best guess isn't even close.

As Peter was speaking, God the Father—who could not stay away and could not remain silent—interrupted him. The record says:

*While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. A voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him."*

This was the Father's stamp of approval on Jesus and all he was doing. The God whose home is in heaven had also stepped to earth. His glory was shrouded in a cloud because it might otherwise have been too great for the three human wit-

nesses to survive. God the Father made it clear who Jesus is and what we are to do. Jesus is God's beloved Son chosen to atone for human sin and reconcile us to God. We are to listen

to Jesus and do what he says. Here is the central core of Christianity: 1.) God sent his Son to save the world; 2.) We are to listen to his Son and be his disciples; and 3.) Those who accept and follow Jesus will someday be like him in heaven.

This amazing story ends saying, "*The disciples kept this to themselves, and told no one at that time what they had seen.*" Perhaps they needed time to process the experience. They had

***Whatever our wildest imagination of God's heaven may be, our best guess isn't even close.***

to figure it out for themselves before they could tell anyone else. But there came a time when they could tell. Peter wrote about it later in the New Testament in II Peter 1:16-18:

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.

In other words, Peter was saying that he could never have made up all of this. It was too majestic, too magnificent. No, he had seen it himself. He heard the words of God. He saw Jesus. He saw what heaven is like.

And you can see it, too! If you are a Christian, you will someday be like Jesus. If you are a Christian, you will someday be with Jesus. If you are a Christian, heaven will some day be your spectacular home with Jesus forever.

*Faith Matters*® is the Broadcast Ministry of  
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church  
6630 Shady Oak Road  
Eden Prairie MN 55344  
952-944-6300  
[www.faithmatters.fm](http://www.faithmatters.fm)  
©Leith Anderson