

## Heaven – Thoughts, the Bible, Questions and Answers, and more Questions

### Some of the Basics

1. If there is a just God, there must be a heaven. To believe in a future, endless, and human-populated heaven beyond the grave requires that one believe in a God who transcends all creation. The God of the Christian faith is a just God. Surely a just God created a world designed for justice, but our broken, sin-filled world constantly reflects injustice. If this world is all there is, God must be unjust. But if God is just and this world ends for many without justice, this world will give way to a future world where all things will be made right. This is the “heaven hope” that motivates so many of us and that gives hope for those who have experienced horrifying injustices. The “heaven hope” believes God is just and, therefore, the just God will ultimately bring justice.
2. There is no heaven for Christians without the resurrection of Jesus. To believe in a future, endless, and human-populated heaven means death is not the final word. In the Christian heaven promise, there is one death-defeating moment: Easter. On Easter, God snapped the shackles of death, overpowered the death-dealing powers, and raised Jesus from the grave into eternal life. The entire heaven promise for Christians is based on that one day, that one morning, that one moment. Without the resurrection of Jesus, there is no heaven hope or heaven promise for Christians.
3. The best evidence of heaven is the resurrection of Jesus. To believe in a future, endless, and human-populated heaven means Christians will think about that heaven by examining the resurrected body of Jesus. It means heaven will be an embodied existence and not just a spirit-y or soul-y kind of ethereal, spiritual existence. It means heaven will include such things as eating (Jesus ate) and fellowship with those we know on earth (Jesus enjoyed fellowship with his disciples). The most common images for the Christian heaven are then not harps and wispy bodies, but a city, a banquet, with Jesus as the focal point (receiving worship).
4. Near-death and out-of-body experiences are unreliable guides. While it seems to be a new trend to believe in heaven because of stories of near-death experiences or out-of-body experiences, those who study these stories know there are common features as well as differences. Are they exciting and inspiring? Yes, for many! Are they the reason we anticipate a heavenly/eternal kingdom? No! We don't trust in a promise of Christ's victory over death because of stories of near death or out of body experiences. We trust in life after death because of the truth of God's Word and the revelation of Christ.
5. Heaven will be full of surprises:
  - a) The first hour. If God is just and heaven is about God making all things right, the “first hour” in heaven will be a time when all things are made right. It will be filled with moments of “actualized” grace. We have the promise and assurance of God's grace in our lives now. We have a living HOPE in Christ now. In the first hour of heaven, that HOPE will be fully actualized and made real. Grace meets us face to face. Jesus meets us face to face. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians, “what we know now is only partial, then it will be made complete...” We will see everything we've believed about Jesus made real in the LIVING Jesus. Remember when Jesus said to Thomas after the resurrection, “blessed are those who believe without seeing” (John 20:29)? In heaven, WE WILL SEE JESUS! Our faith will be fulfilled. I also believe there will be moments of reconciliation in those first moments in heaven. Yes, we not only experience what ultimate reconciliation with God “looks like” but also we will realize the fullness of forgiveness in our relationships one with another. The Body of Christ will truly be “one” as Jesus prayed it would be in John 17.
  - b) Who will be there? The Christian heavenly promise, rooted as it is in a just God who will makes all things right, sometimes gets twisted into cajoling and coercing our fellow humans into doing this or saying that or confessing a set of lines and believing a few certain truths just so . . . or else! The more we focus on what we have to do to get into heaven, the more we miss the whole point: the heaven promise is not rooted in what we do, but in the resurrection of Jesus. So when we ask who will be there, the only place to start is “Jesus!” The Christian heaven promise presents a heaven where Jesus is in the center of everything. So, heaven and the eternal Kingdom of God is designed for Jesus and all those who are to be connected to Him by God's grace and love. Those who will be there are those whose names have been

recorded in the “book of life”...whose lives have been washed in the “blood of the Lamb...those who wear of the robes of righteousness given to them by a loving Savior and Lord.

- c) What it will be like? Someone I know told me he hopes in heaven we won't be aware of others; he said he hopes we will be so focused on God that everything else will fall away into non-existence. He was hoping not to meet up with some of his enemies and he feared they'd all be in heaven! He hoped it would be some kind of eternal individualism. I reminded him that the vision of heaven in the Bible is not quite like that. Yes, God is central, but the image is not just of individuals absorbed in a beatific vision of ecstasy — it is of a thriving, flourishing community centered on Jesus. Heaven will be a communal life because God created us for relationships with Him and each other. Heaven will mean that life the way that God originally designed it will be working as designed. Eternity with Jesus will be the restoration of God's original vision for His creation. In that new creation, individuals don't go it alone. We live in a new society focused on and given life and light by Jesus.

6. Heaven is about our deepest happiness. The promise of heaven lays before us the hope that we will experience joy and happiness at the deepest levels: in our love for God and for self and for others and for all that God has created. Our yearning and quest for joy and happiness and deep contentment is God's gift to us now of what someday will be a settled and growing reality: we will be happy and grow happier and happier endlessly into the joy of God's own joy. Heaven is about pleasure, our deepest pleasures, that will abound and abound into deeper pleasures.

7. Heaven will be more like our present earth than like the ethereal heaven found in so much Christian art and thinking. Unfortunately, for too long, Christians have imagined heaven in exclusively spiritual or spirit-y terms. That is, God designed us mostly as souls and these bodies of an encumbrance need to be shed like a lizard's skin. Heaven is not wispy, but earthly. Jesus shows us that: his resurrected body was not a soul but a body. The heaven promise of the Bible starts not with bodiless souls or disembodied spirits but with embodied spirits and souls that identify who we are and how we are made. The heaven promise imagines a global fellowship that is more like a grand city — the New Jerusalem — than an ecstasy of spirit. The heaven promise means our bodies will function right, our social institutions and social forms will be right, and our society will be the way God designed it.

8. A heaven hope reshapes all of life. Another unfortunate element in the history of the church has been the occasional rise of the person who gets so enthused about the future heaven they become useless for life in the here and now. The promise of heaven prepares us more for life now than anything that life provides. The promise of heaven that makes us want to die is not the Christian promise but something else — perhaps some kind of Platonism or Gnosticism. The promise of eternal life, since it is glimpsed in the resurrection body of Jesus and in the flourishing city, reveals to us the kind of future that makes a radical difference today. Those who most believe in that promise are most prepared for a life of significance now. A heaven hope reshapes all of life.

### **So, “What happens when you die?”**

This is an interesting question and I guess we can never be really 100% sure of the answer. Well, I know that I can't. I do know that we will all die. I know that death is a great mystery. New creation can't simply be more of the same (subject to decay and the never-ending increase in entropy). But it also doesn't seem likely that it is simply beautiful scenery, peace, and singing “alleluia: in timeless eternity. In the new creation we continue to live, learn, and experience. The new creation will be wholly sacramental, suffused with the presence of the life of God. Paul talks about resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 concluding that the unfolding of events is “so that God may be all in all.” Revelation 21 provides the same kind of image for the new heaven and new earth. Inconceivable. Eternity and eternal life present something of a conundrum. The laws of nature in the new heavens and new earth will not be exactly the same, making it hard to imagine. Yet it seems a coherent hope to believe that the laws of its nature will be perfectly adapted to the everlasting life of that world where ‘Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away’ (Revelation 21:4), just as the laws of nature of this world are perfectly adapted to the character of its freely evolving process, through which the old creation has made itself. There will be discontinuity within continuity. There is continuity as the new creation is a ‘redeemed transform of the former’ and discontinuity in the nature of the matter and laws adapted to the eternal imperishable. Paul tells us that ‘flesh and blood cannot inherit the

kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.’ (1 Corinthians 15:50) This is a mystery, but it must be. The new creation will continue to be a dynamic reality with an ongoing unfolding fulfillment of God’s plans on a different plane. We will continue to grow, learn, explore, and experience in the new heavens and the new earth in the presence of God. There is no static final picture presented in the New Testament, and certainly not in Revelation.

In Christian hope, heaven isn’t our ultimate destiny. New Testament scholar and theologian, NT Wright exclaims, *“Heaven is important but it’s not our final destination. If you want to say that when someone dies they go to heaven, fine. But that’s only a temporary holding pattern that is life after death. And what I’m much more interested in, or the New Testament is much more interested in, is what I’ve called life after life after death.”* In other words, our hope for eternity is our entrance into a new creation. A bustling city, a glorious concert, an image of ultimate “shalom.”

- a) Resurrection life is not static; the living God will create a new creation in which the resurrected will grow, develop, learn and explore deeper and deeper into who God is, who we are, and what love, justice, peace are all about. The Spirit brings communicative freedom, creation, etc., so we are to see in resurrection life an ongoing creative freedom into newness.
- b) Resurrection bodies is not what is all about; body is individuality and resurrection extends individuality into the kingdom of God — unique identities who are recognizable and who communicate and socialize. The body is about “visible expression” and “personal shape”.
- c) Resurrection life is cosmic and corporate, and not just individual: it is a kingdom society.
- d) Resurrection spirituality, or what Paul calls the “spiritual body” (pneumatikos), is animation and guidance by the Holy Spirit. The “spiritual body” then is transcendent, Christological and eschatological.
- e) Resurrection entails contrast with now, entails continuity with now, and entails transformation.

The following are quotes and observations from the academic work of N.T. Wright, Biblical Scholar and Theologian - specifically the *Resurrection of the Son of God, Surprised by Hope, History and Eschatology, and How God Became King.*

*“I’ve often put it like this, if somebody you know has been very ill, you say, ‘Poor old so and so, he’s just a shadow of his former self.’ And the extraordinary truth in the New Testament is that if you are in Christ and dwell by the Spirit, you are just a shadow of your future self. There is a real you to which the present you correspond as a photocopy corresponds to the glorious original. You know, there is a real you, which God is going to make, and it will be more physical — more real, not less.”*

*“The point of the resurrection...is that the present bodily life is not valueless just because it will die...What you do with your body in the present matters because God has a great future in store for it...what you do in the present — by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself — will last into God’s future. These activities are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly, a little more bearable, until the day when we leave it behind altogether ... They are part of what we may call building for God’s kingdom.”*

*“Basically, Wright believes that when those who are in Christ die, they do not “go to heaven” as most people imagine. According to Wright, those who die in Christ merely “sleep” in perfect peace in the presence of Christ, if you will, awaiting the “Day of the Lord” when the “dead in Christ” will rise, and the kingdom of God will be fully realized.”*

Heaven is not our ultimate destination. It is a holding-place, until the final resurrection. At the final resurrection God will re-make our physical bodies. When Christ returns there will be a resurrection and transformation of our bodies. When Christ returns there will be a ‘new heaven’ and a ‘new earth’ and we receive ‘new bodies’, ‘we are resurrected, and heaven comes down to earth.’ A seed falls into the ground and dies. When it comes alive its form as a plant or flower or tree is different to the form that it had as a seed. Similar to the metamorphosis of a caterpillar turning into a butterfly. It is the same organism but through transformation it becomes so much more than it could have ever been in its first form.

**A correct biblical view does not say Jesus-followers are ultimately destined for heaven. Instead, at the end of time, God will literally re-make our physical bodies and return us to a newly restored earth. Heaven is important but it is not our final destination.**

So then, what is "heaven?"

Biblically "heaven" is a temporary holding place. That is "life after death." The Bible gives us few clues about this. Paul says, in Philippians 1:21-23: *"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far." So, immediately after death, we shall be with Christ, in heaven. And that, of course, is good."*

### **Implications on daily life NOW**

While that is important and interesting, what the New Testament is more concerned with is "life after life after death." Or, the "after-afterlife." Here we have far more about our ultimate destination upon being physically resurrected. Our final destination should affect our lives in the here and now. Because we believe in God's kingdom of justice and peace, it gives us focus to work on God's kingdom coming in the present. In this regard remember that The Lord's Prayer was never understood to be a purely future hope. This is the "age to come" invading "this present age." And while the age to come will come in its fullness at the final resurrection of the dead, the in-breaking of the kingdom (heaven coming to earth) has been happening since the earthly life of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus.

### **So, to sum up:**

- a) When a Jesus-followers dies they go to heaven, to be with the Lord.
- b) Heaven is not our ultimate destination. It is a holding-place, until the final resurrection.
- c) At the final resurrection God will re-make our physical bodies.
- d) We will live, in a state of everlasting time, in God's newly restored creation. This will be the unifying of heaven and earth. When "the times reach their fulfillment" God will "bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ." (Ephesians 1:10)

### **Extra "Stuff" on Heaven and Hell**

#### **The Importance of Heaven and Hell**

This is one of, if not the most important question you will ever think about; a question that every sane person must care about. You can deny that heaven and hell are real, but you cannot rationally be indifferent about the matter. Given what is at stake, the only sensible attitude is to care, and to care deeply.

Say it as you will, heaven remains fascinating:

But I want to emphasize that there is far more involved here than mere fascination. Indeed, fascination can be nothing more than curiosity at the unusual or the entertaining, the mysterious, and even the bizarre. Certainly, much that is written about heaven and hell is sensational and appeals to these tendencies. Moreover, popular writing about the afterlife is often sentimental, simplistic, and emotionally manipulative. The Christian doctrines of the afterlife involve a set of profoundly substantive truth claims with explosive implications.

I believe that a belief in heaven and hell strike at the heart of Christian orthodoxy.

Indeed, I think it is especially incumbent on all who profess Jesus as Lord to remain true to these remarkable doctrines and their far-reaching implications. I find it ironic that contemporary theologians sometimes wax eloquent about the radical nature of Christian theology or the truth of the Christian narrative but become mute or tentative when the issue of eternity is broached. The Christian story is extraordinary, to be sure, but it is radically incomplete and ultimately unsatisfying without a robust doctrine of the afterlife, and one simply cannot seriously affirm Trinity, incarnation, atonement, and resurrection without going on to heartily affirm "the life everlasting."

## **Which issues matter then?**

In particular, I believe these doctrines are most pertinent to such perennial issues as the problem of evil, the nature of personal identity, the foundations of morality, and, ultimately, the very meaning of life.

## **Heaven?**

1. Is the ultimate triumph of God's love: the human story comes to a comic end.
2. Is the answer to our deepest longings.
3. Is new - a new heaven and a new earth: an embodied reality of newness.
4. Is the death of death.
5. Is a reunion of truth, beauty, and goodness.
6. Is a celebration of the best of human culture.
7. Is being at home with God.

These seven big ideas about heaven are biblically solid, non-speculative, and inherent to what the Bible says about heaven.

*Happiness* - Humans seek to be happy, and any superficial sense of happiness is a reflection of a deep-seated "vision" of happiness. We have a built-in "hard drive" (the Biblical concept of the heart) to desire happiness, but what if that "hard drive" is a guarantee of frustration, a mechanism that ironically assures our unhappiness because it can never be fully realized? Are we, through no fault of our own, born with an "addiction" for happiness in a universe where it can never be satisfied? No. We are "hard wired" by God to long for that "deeper country" (C.S. Lewis). We were created to be in relationship with God and to experience the fullness of life in His creation and presence. Our hearts LONG for that experience. Hence – HEAVEN/RESTORED CREATION.

*Love* – Let me point out that there is a deep connection between our yearning for love and our desire for happiness. Only if we love and are loved can we be truly and deeply happy. For many people, the essential key to happiness is to find their soul mate, the perfect relationship that they believe will fulfill them and at last provide the happiness they crave. If we love God most of all, we are thereby inspired to love other things more deeply and truly than we would if we loved them more than we love God. To see God's face in heaven will not mean that our interest in other people and other created things will diminish or even that we will love them less. Rather, it means we will see God clearly in all his good gifts, and we will love and enjoy them even more as a result. The Trinity is the Alpha and the Omega, and because of that, heaven makes perfect sense. If the Trinity is bedrock reality, then love is the very heart of the meaning of life. And when perfect love achieves its ends, we may hope to find the perfect happiness we crave, the perfect comic end of the cosmic drama. In the end, Walls thinks of God in a way that means God is the dance itself - C. S. Lewis "*that in Christianity, God is not a static thing—not even a person—but a dynamic, pulsating activity, a life, almost a drama. Almost, if you will not think me irreverent, a kind of dance.*"

## **What is the foundation of a "belief" in Hell?**

Because of love, therefore the possibility of hell. Some say that if God is good and if God wants all to be saved, then all will be saved — or God is not good. (A common way of framing the problem for belief in hell.) The crux of the matter is free will...if all are saved, then there is no free will. Therefore, unless God compels all, and there is no free will, then hell must be a possibility. If freedom can account for evil in this world, the same freedom may explain why hell exists in the next. CS Lewis also famously noted that hell is locked from the inside — by the choice of those there. Love is demand; love is a choice; love emerges from freedom. The establishment of freedom therefore establishes free choice about love. If God is love, God is freedom; if God is freedom, free choice is part of the world God has made. That is, some may choose not to love God, not to love Jesus, not to be with God forever.

## **A Big One about the Afterlife – Will we know each other?**

Will we recognize our loved ones? Will they recognize us? Will we know one another?

There are some who have what is often called a “*theo-centric*” theory of heaven/the afterlife and they tend to focus on our union with God and our worship of God and God as the Be-All of heaven. There are others who have a “*socio-centric*” theory of heaven/the afterlife and they tend to focus on both a union with God as well as knowledge of one another. And there are some who say, “We can’t know, it’s all speculation, and let’s focus on the present.”

This posture will not fit the biblical evidence that focuses on a future kingdom of God. Radical agnosticism about heaven or the future kingdom fails to have the confidence and courage of the biblical authors and tends to diminish the significance of the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

I contend that we will not only know one another but we will know one another even better than we do now. At the end of the gospel of Luke, the Road to Emmaus scene with Jesus, we see both bodily continuity and discontinuity, and part of that continuity is resumption of relationships (Luke 24). If Jesus’ raised body is paradigmatic then personal identity is also resumed fully. Of course, this raises a huge question: How do people maintain identity in continuity between their death and resurrection? How much of us survives? What survives?

### **What if you DON’T believe in Heaven: What’s that like?**

There is a tragic tendency today among some Christians not so much to deny heaven as a genuine hope and reality but to minimize it as a factor in the faith or, what is worse, to diminish it by saying we ought to focus on the present life (because, after all, heaven is just speculation).

What happens when we don’t believe in heaven. What’s that really like? What if this world is all we have? Here are some thoughts from those who didn’t believe in heaven:

*Bertrand Russell* - Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labor of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man’s achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul’s habitation henceforth be safely built. Mindless, undetermined origins lead to termination, not a destination. We must accept this cold reality and continue, Russell thinks, to pursue our noblest ideals. Yet, later in life all he could muster was “Outside human desires, there is no moral standard.”

*Richard Taylor* – He takes the famous myth of Sisyphus as his starting point. Sisyphus, recall, was the mythical character condemned by the gods to push a large stone up a hill, which then rolled back down to the bottom, only to be pushed up again, and again, forever. The main difference between us and Sisyphus is that whereas he continues to push the stone up the hill forever, we pass the task on to our children. They then pick up where we left off and continue in our steps. Civilizations are built and destroyed, but new ones are built on the rubble of earlier ones. We just keep picking up the stones and building afresh, and the beat goes on. We are all Sisyphus, and we are all rolling stones. All we have in our veins is a will to live, and the drive for meaning is vain. Meaning is the satisfaction we find in our life, that’s it.

*Thomas Nagel* – He exhorts us to embrace the irony of our life. “Reference to our small size and short life span and to the fact that all of mankind will eventually vanish without a trace are metaphors for the backward step which permits us to regard ourselves from without and to find the particular form of our lives curious and slightly surprising.” In short, then, one of the inevitable “side effects” of intellectual and emotional sophistication is a sense of the absurdity of our lives. But since our intellectual and emotional sophistication is the very thing that makes us human and gives our lives richness and depth, we should not be unduly bothered by the sense of absurdity that comes with it. Rather, we should embrace the irony and live with it.

*Keith Parsons* – He offers one of the oldest of all despairs of life: Why not draw the reverse conclusion and say that, since we know life is fleeting, we should strive to experience all the meaning we can in that short

compass? The message we should draw from our mortality is this: You have a limited number of days, hours, and minutes. Therefore, you should strive to fill each of those days, hours, and minutes with meaning. You should strive to fill them with learning and gaining wisdom—with compassion for the less fortunate, with love for friends and family, with doing a job well, with fighting against evil and obscurantism, and yes, with enjoying sex, TV, pizza, and ballgames.

*Carl Sagan* – Carl Sagan did not believe in the afterlife or heaven, said this as he approached death “I would love to believe that when I die, I will live again, that some thinking, feeling, remembering part of me will continue.” A page later, Sagan went on to add, “If there were life after death, I might, no matter when I die, satisfy most of these deep curiosities and longings. But if death is nothing more than an endless sleep, this is a forlorn hope.”

### **Is Heaven Vital for Morality or Not?**

You may well recall the famous scene in *Les Miserables* in which Jean Valjean comes clean in public to take the place of another who was in fact on trial instead of himself (Valjean). The scene poses the moral theory called **ALTRUISM**, that is, that one does what is good for others in a disinterested manner. It might be said that altruism is considered by many to be the highest form of moral action; heroic, in fact, when one poses that giving one’s life for others is the ultimate act when especially not connected to hope for reward after death. (Some think this kind of altruism is hardwired into us biologically — even if the hardwiring is a fiction that benefits human survival.) Others today contend no one does anything solely for the sake of others but instead all moral action springs from **SELF-INTEREST** and may then be seen as selfishness. Thus, the debate is between altruism and egoism, between morality and self-interest, between other-ness and selfishness.

One scholar I admire contends that the doctrines of heaven and hell are vital to an account of ultimate reality and that this makes best sense of moral obligation and what he calls “deeply persuasive moral motivation.” When faced with a moral action, ought we to choose what benefits ourselves or what benefits others (family, friends, community, nation)? But one wonders then if there is a God, choosing what benefits others also always benefits the individual. Moral duty may seem morally intuitive, but will it be rewarded? Or does it fall flat into a social contribution by death? American culture is described in such a way that one can genuinely wonder if self-interest is not the ruling ground of action instead of morality or altruism. I do not think we need to sever altruism from self-interest. I do believe, though, the naturalistic basis for altruism is lacking. There is a “heaven and hell” basis for ethical behavior. I believe that Biblical view solves the dilemma of egoism vs. altruism.

Christian ethics are based in the Trinity and that we are made in God’s image and thus fit for relations with God in God’s way of relating. Doing good for the sake of others acts the way the Trinity acts: thus, altruism is Trinity-like. Sacrifice is how the Trinity acts in a fallen world. Thus, it is a foretaste of heaven; to act in egoism is foretaste, then, of hell. So, a belief in heaven, in effect, dissolves the dilemma between egoism and altruism. Acting for others is what makes a person most happy. This is not self-ishness but self-interest. Altruism with no hope of reward is not a heaven-based form of altruism. Resurrection is the ground of Christian action. Ultimate motivation comes from being loved by the ultimate lover and returning that love.