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What Is the MEANING of HEAVEN?

A college professor described a recent discussion about heaven with his friend. “With the look of a man who has been invited to a dull party and cannot decline, my best friend confided that he was worried about heaven.”

“I know we’re supposed to look forward to being in heaven,’ the friend explained. ‘But when I read the book of Revelation, it looks like all we will be doing is bowing up and down.

“‘Up and down,’ he repeated in a note of despair. ‘Up and down for all eternity!’”¹

People—including Christians—develop strange, unbiblical views of heaven. The notions about heaven that many people have do not come from Scripture; rather, it is their *failure* to study Scripture that has led to a lack of knowledge and understanding of the biblical meaning of heaven.

What is heaven? People use the word *heaven* to describe the grandeur of secular things, entirely unrelated to the biblical concept.

Others see heaven as a mystical place in the clouds with an unending church service. Many concepts of heaven are without scriptural warrant. The word *heaven* is used in three different ways in Scripture to describe the atmospheric heaven, the celestial heaven, and “the third heaven.” Additionally, there are related words that further describe heaven: *paradise* (known also as *the intermediate heaven*), *the new heaven and the new earth*, and *the New Jerusalem*.

THE ATMOSPHERIC HEAVEN

As a young boy I liked to lie on the lawn and look up at the sky, watching the cloud formations and imagine what they were: animals, people—my imagination was limitless in speculating about what I was seeing. That is the atmospheric heaven we see.

Heaven is sometimes used to describe the troposphere—the space surrounding the earth and extending outward to a height of about six miles. This is the atmospheric heaven from which the earth receives dew (Deut. 33:13), frost (Job 38:29), rain and snow (Isa. 55:10), wind (Job 26:13), and thunder (1 Sam. 2:10). The clouds are in the atmospheric heaven (Ps. 147:8), and the birds fly in it (Gen. 1:20).

Since the dew, rain, snow, and wind come from “heaven,” it is a reminder of God’s gracious gift to all humanity (Matt. 5:45).

THE CELESTIAL HEAVEN

Heaven is also used to describe the celestial realm—the realm of the sun, moon, stars, and planets. This is the universe. God created the universe (Gen. 1:1; Ps. 33:6), placing these lights in the celestial heaven (Gen. 1:14). Scientists have discovered a star that is so large, if it were hollow, it could contain our entire solar system with the sun at the center and all the planets revolving around the sun. This is but one reminder of the vastness of the celestial heaven that God created.

THE THIRD HEAVEN

Heaven, as the dwelling place of God, is also called “the third heaven.” This is truly “the heaven of heavens, the abode of God.”²² The apostle Paul was “caught up to the third heaven” and given a glimpse of heaven’s glory, to sustain him in the time of suffering, reminding him of the magnificent glory that awaited him (2 Cor. 12:2). “Paul was granted the sight of the glory that lies ahead and was thereby fortified to enter patiently all the suffering which awaited him”²³ This is a reminder to us that amid the suffering and trials of life, a heavenly perspective is necessary. Only those who keep their eyes fixed on the glory to come will endure the trials and sufferings in the present.

Like Paul, the apostle John was caught up into heaven (Rev. 4:1ff.). As John was transported to heaven, he saw “One sitting on the throne” (Rev. 4:2). John saw the twenty-four elders, the royal attendants, and the *shekinah* of God in all the brilliance of the Majestic Glory. Truly, heaven is the dwelling place of the glory of God.

God is enthroned in heaven (v. 2) from where He governs the affairs of nations and scoffs at their inept efforts in rebellion against His authority (Ps. 2:4). God’s rule in heaven is a reminder that His purpose will be accomplished; Christ will ultimately rule in triumph over the nations (Ps. 2:6–9).

Heaven is where God dwells. It is a specific place; it is not a simply a state. It is incorrect to define it as essentially a state. Heaven is a *place*. Jesus reminded His disciples to pray, “Our Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 6:9). It is the place Jesus has gone to prepare for His own and has promised to come back and bring us to live with Him in heaven (John 14:2–3). John tells us of the new heaven and the new earth and the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God—which is what Jesus has gone to prepare for us (Rev. 21:1–2).

Heaven is a place of unparalleled tranquility and beauty (Rev. 21:1–22:7). It includes the new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21:1) and

the holy city, the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:2). It is the place where God will dwell with His people and have intimate fellowship with them (Rev. 21:3).

PARADISE

As I mention elsewhere in this book, Cypress Gardens was a favorite place for Helen and me to visit and relax amid the magnificent scenery. Located in central Florida, Cypress Gardens reveals the colorful creation of God. The rich, red, cascading bougainvillea bloom throughout most of the year; the spring flower festival with the brilliant poinsettias, azaleas, and many other beautiful flowers decorate the park. They are a reminder of God’s magnificent creation—and a reminder of paradise.

Heaven is also called “paradise,” where Paul heard “inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak” (2 Cor. 12:4). These are words “often used of divine secrets which were not intended for human beings.”⁴

Paradise is pictured as a garden, originally describing the parks of the Persian king.⁵ It also is depicted as the garden of Eden, the creation of God (Gen. 2:8–10). In the garden of Eden, God “caused to grow every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food” (v. 9). A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden (v. 10). The picturesque language reveals the unparalleled beauty of the garden of Eden. The lush flora and fauna was not only God’s provision for food, but also a picture of beauty. Visitors to the Butchart Gardens on Canada’s Vancouver Island, the Sissinghurst Castle Garden in Kent, England, with its White Garden, Rose Garden, Cottage Garden, and Lime Walk, or other magnificent gardens in the world today can only imagine how beautiful the garden of Eden must have been. It would have surpassed any floral beauty that exists today in our fallen world.

Unquestionably, there is a continuity between the garden of Eden

in Genesis and the paradise envisioned at the end of the age. In the pre-Christian era it was recognized “that the paradise of the first age reappears in that of the last. The site of reopened Paradise is almost without exception the earth, or the New Jerusalem.”⁶

Ezekiel envisions a future day when there will be a restoration of the earth to the sinless perfection of the garden of Eden (Ezek. 36:35). In that future day the waste places of the earth will become “like Eden . . . the garden of the Lord” (Isa. 51:3). Paradise will result not only in the restoration of the earth, but it will be a day of joy, thanksgiving, and music (Isa. 51:3). The fall of man through the first Adam demands a restoration of all things by the Last Adam, Jesus Christ.

The continuity of the present paradise with the final abode of the redeemed and the restoration of all things is seen in the promise to the overcomers at the church in Ephesus: “To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God” (Rev. 2:7). References to the “river of the water of life” (Rev. 22:1), the final destruction of Satan (Rev. 20:10), and the reversal of suffering and death (Rev. 21:4) all point to the final restoration of paradise on the renewed earth.⁷

THE INTERMEDIATE HEAVEN

Paradise is described as the dwelling place of believers between death and the resurrection. Christ promised the repentant thief on the cross, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). This is the temporary home of believers prior to receiving their resurrection bodies and living in the new heaven and the new earth (although, as mentioned earlier, there is a continuity in the term “paradise” between Eden and the final abode of believers). It is sometimes referred to as “the intermediate heaven.”⁸

Christ’s promise to the repentant thief is significant. The promise is a denial of the false doctrines of soul sleep and purgatory. The

repentant thief had no works to present to the Lord, only his simple but sincere faith that Jesus was indeed the Christ of God. Yet Jesus promised him that on that very day he would be with the Lord in paradise. “Today” stands in the emphatic position in the Greek text. There would be no interlude for the repentant thief, no waiting, no secondary category of holding before he could enter heaven. Today. When his head dropped in death, his soul and spirit would enter the glories of paradise with the Lord Jesus!

What a glorious truth this promise holds for believers. There is no confusion or question about the destiny of departed loved ones. They are in paradise with the Lord.

Paul yearned for heaven, exclaiming, “I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better” (Phil. 1:23). Paul’s desire was strong; the word “desire” stands in the emphatic position. He knew that the moment he left this earthly life, he would be with Christ. That would be “very much better.” Again Paul’s comments are emphatic and strong. There was no comparison between Paul being with Christ in paradise and being on the old earth.

Although believers will not receive their resurrection bodies until the rapture, it is apparent that believers will have bodies in the intermediate state in heaven. At the transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appeared with Christ to James, Peter, and John (Matt. 17:3–4). The fact that they were seen as the prophets bears testimony to their corporeity. They appeared in bodily form.

In the story of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19–31), the rich man recognized Abraham and Lazarus. How could he have identified them? He would have had to see them in a physical form. Lazarus is pictured reclining, banquet style, next to Abraham, indicating he was there in physical form (v. 23).

When the believers are martyred during the tribulation, they

appear in heaven, crying for justice: “How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Rev. 6:10). Although they are called “souls” (v. 9), the term refers to the entire person, including a physical body (cf. Acts 2:41). They are given robes and told that they should rest for a while. From this we learn that in the intermediate heaven, believers think, know, and remember the former life, and they wear clothing. It indicates there is continuity between the person they were on earth and the person they are in the intermediate heaven. They have bodies as well as minds.

THE NEW HEAVEN AND THE NEW EARTH

The new heaven and the new earth are the final destiny of believers. John received a vision of the new heaven and the new earth coming down from God out of heaven (Rev. 21:1). John went on to describe the realm of the new heaven and the new earth as well as the New Jerusalem. These will be the final destiny and dwelling place of believers throughout eternity. The explanation on the new heaven and the new earth will be developed later.

From this study we learn that the word “heaven” is used in several different ways. The focus of our study will be heaven as the dwelling place of God.

These and other passages also provide us with the wonderful assurance that upon death the believer goes immediately into the presence of Christ in heaven, a realm far better than this earth. It is the preferable life. Paul says he prefers “rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8). “To be at home” means “to be one among his own people.”⁹ Heaven is our true home.

And believers have a continuity with their earthly life, both in knowledge and in physical form. They are recognizable and physically identifiable. These wonderful words should remove any fear, any

question, and any doubt concerning the destiny of believers at death. We have a strong assurance of our future.

THE NEW JERUSALEM

On one of our trips to Israel, when Helen and I were in Jerusalem, we spoke to a native resident of Jerusalem. “You think this is a holy city?!” he exclaimed. “You will find it is a very unholy city.”

Present Jerusalem is certainly a city in turmoil, with Jews and Arabs in constant conflict. But a new Jerusalem is coming where there will no longer be turmoil and warfare. There will be peace—and beauty—and fellowship.

Jesus promised that He was going to prepare a new home for us: “In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2). Jesus was referring to the New Jerusalem, described in Revelation 3:12 and 21:2, and He promised, “If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am *there* you may be also” (John 14:3, italics added). Jesus will return to take us with Him that we may live with Him forever in the city He has prepared for us. What a glorious future!

The writer of Hebrews also tells us the heavenly Jerusalem will be the place of residence for God Himself, the Lord Jesus, angels, church age believers, and Old Testament saints (Heb. 12:22–24). All believers will have a home in the New Jerusalem; but, as we will see later, the new earth will also be the dwelling place of believers for all eternity. Even as some people today have a home in the city and a second home in the country, perhaps in eternity we will live both in the New Jerusalem and on the new earth.

The New Jerusalem is seen coming down out of heaven (Rev. 21:2). Some believe it hovers over the earth, while others see it descending to the earth itself. Probably the latter is true, since the normal language would suggest that “I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming

down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev. 21:2). Further, what is the point of the New Jerusalem coming down to the earth? It reveals that God again will have fellowship with mankind as when He walked with Adam in the garden of Eden (Gen. 2:15f.). Revelation 21:3 indicates that God will fellowship with the redeemed in eternity: “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them.” The gap that separated the holy and righteous God from sinful humanity has been bridged through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Hence, in eternity God will dwell intimately with redeemed mankind.

The New Jerusalem will radiate the glory of God (Rev. 21:10–11). The brilliance and glory “refers to the shining radiance which comes from the presence and glory of God.”¹⁰ The brilliance of the city, described “like a very costly stone, as a stone of crystal-clear jasper” (Rev. 21:11), could refer to a diamond; it is an opaque stone that “will connect the light of the heavenly city with God its Maker.”¹¹ The brilliance of the city will continually remind the inhabitants of the presence of the glory of God. He will dwell with His people.

Whether it’s designing businesses or home residences, architects always enjoy seeing the outcome of their blueprints—the final product. I worked as a residential architect for several years, and it was always intensely satisfying to see a finished home after the final piece of siding and soffit was hung. But imagine how we all will feel—the excitement—when we see the most magnificent buildings—in fact, a city—ready to be inhabited!

The city known as “the New Jerusalem” is described as a cube, 1,500 miles long, wide, and high (Rev. 21:16). “If we take that literally,” Pastor Erwin Lutzer writes, “heaven will be composed of 396,000 stories (at twenty feet per story), each having an area as big as one half the size of the United States! Divide that into separate condominiums,

and you have plenty of room for all who have been redeemed by God since the beginning of time.”¹² But some may be fearful of such a large city—how would we find anyone in a city of that magnitude? Lutzer’s answer: “You need not fear that you will be lost in the crowd; nor need you fear being stuck on the thousandth floor when all of the activity is in the downstairs lounge. All you will need to do is to decide where you would like to be, and you will be there!”¹³

The wall surrounding the city is 216 feet high or wide (Rev. 21:17). It is not entirely clear whether this refers to the height or thickness of the wall. Probably it refers to the thickness of the wall, as Ezekiel also measured its thickness (cf. Ezek. 40:5; 42:20).¹⁴ In this case, the wall would be a reminder that the city is protected—although it would be symbolic since in the eternal state there will be no evil.

The wall of the city has twelve gates, inscribed with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel; twelve angels stand guard at the gates (Rev. 21:12). The twelve angels “function as watchmen to reinforce the impression of security (Isa. 62:6; cf. 2 Chron. 8:14).”¹⁵ Three gates face east, three gates face north, three gates face the south, and three gates face the west (Rev. 21:13).

The city has twelve foundation stones, with the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb inscribed on them (Rev. 21:14). Since the apostles are the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20), this is a reminder that the church—the aggregate of believers from Pentecost until the rapture—are also inhabitants of the city.

The jasper wall, dazzling like a diamond, continually reflects the glory of God (Rev. 21:18). Motorists cannot look at the rising sun thirty minutes after daybreak; its sharp rays create a harsh, blinding glare. Drivers heading toward the sunrise must slow down. If we cannot look at the brilliance of the sun, how much more will the New Jerusalem radiate the glory of God? The city, the “buildings, towers, or roofs seen from outside the city” are “pure gold” (Rev. 21:18), sug-

gesting it is “so pure that it is transparent.”¹⁶ The golden streets similarly radiate God’s glory (v. 21). The foundation stones of the city are adorned with twelve precious stones, emphasizing the beauty and brilliance of the city. It all redounds to the glory of God. Each of the twelve gates is a pearl (v. 21).

Every detail of the city reflects and portrays the greatness, magnificence, and beauty of the Lord. It creates an aura, an awe at the majesty of God. And the wonder of wonders is that we will enjoy eternity, basking in the illuminating presence of the glory of God.

HEAVEN AS A KINGDOM

Heaven is described as a kingdom numerous times in Scripture; it is the eternal kingdom Christ will inaugurate at His second coming. As Daniel explained the dream to Nebuchadnezzar, “In the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever” (Dan. 2:44). The phrases, “never be destroyed . . . endure forever,” are reminders that the kingdom exceeds the thousand years of the millennium. The kingdom is eternal. It is heaven’s rule on earth.

God gave Daniel a vision that the prophet recounted: “I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed” (Dan. 7:13–14). The statements, “everlasting dominion which will not pass away . . . which will not be destroyed” once more are a reminder of the eternity of Christ’s kingdom. It is heaven on earth—on the *new earth*.

A BETTER COUNTRY: OUR HOMELAND

As Americans we proudly sing, “My country ’tis of Thee, sweet land of liberty. . . .” We are proud to be Americans; our country has a great history as a place of refuge and freedom for those who have been persecuted for their faith. Yet most Americans do not have their origin in America. Some 15 percent of Americans have a German background, while about 11 percent have an Irish background. Others have ancestors who came from other European countries. Those are the countries that reflect the background of most Americans (though increasingly immigrants come from Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, and India).

My wife and I made numerous trips to Europe. But on our first trip, after we had spent some time in Germany mingling and interacting with the people, I suddenly turned to Helen and said, “Now I know why I am the way I am.” I was in the country of my origin, and I felt comfortable interacting socially with the people. I understood their characteristics and mannerisms, and they unquestionably understood mine.

That familiarity reflects a basic meaning of heaven. One of the rich, colorful words describing heaven is the word *patrida*. The writer of Hebrews reminds us that people like Abraham and Sarah were aliens on this earth. Their sojourn on earth ended in a foreign land. Their hearts were elsewhere. They were “seeking a country [*patrida*] of their own” (Heb. 11:14). They “desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one” (Heb. 11:16).

These concise comments and this singular word *patrida* open a new vista of understanding about heaven. The word has a familiar meaning. It means “fatherland, homeland, home town, one’s own part of the country.”¹⁷ The word is related to *pater*, meaning “father.” Hence, *patrida* has a family meaning. This is where one’s family lives. It reflects the family’s culture, language, habits. *It is home*. Does that excite you? It should. It is a reminder that we will be with *family* in our *familiar, family home* for all eternity. We will be with family in heaven. We will be home!

The family heritage meaning is also reflected in Luke 2:4 when Joseph left Galilee and went to Bethlehem at the command of Caesar Augustus for the census because Joseph was of the “house and family (*patrias*) of David.” Joseph went to his roots at the census taking. Bethlehem was the place of his origin, his ancestry, his home. *Patrias* refers to “ancestral descent.”¹⁸ It is where one’s ancestors lived.

The word *patrida* is used to describe Galilee as Jesus’ homeland. What was Galilee? It was where Jesus lived from infancy until adulthood, when He began His public ministry. It was where He lived with His mother and Joseph and His siblings. It was the familiar locale. It was where He worked in construction with Joseph. The Galileans were known to Him; He lived among them and fellowshiped with them. They were His people.

Patrida means one’s hometown. Jesus came to His hometown (probably Capernaum at this time) and taught the parables (Matt. 13:54). It was the town where He was familiar with the people, their language, and their customs (cf. Mk. 6:1, 4). He knew the people, their mannerisms, their culture.

What do you think of when you think of “home” on this earth? Perhaps it is the town where you were born and lived as a youth. Perhaps it is where you lived the majority of your married years. Recently, my sister, Anne, and I drove to the town of Morris in Manitoba, where I was born and where both of us lived in our early years. We drove up and down the streets, reminiscing about our life in the town and the association with family and friends. It was an emotional time. It was where we had roots. It had been our early home.

HEAVEN, OUR TRUE HOME

What is home? It is where you are familiar with the people, their social life, their customs, their spiritual life. You know them. *You feel comfortable; you feel at home there.*

That is heaven! It is our true home. That is where we will be reunited with our believing loved ones and ancestors. We will be *totally comfortable* in those surroundings, enjoying the fellowship, the interaction, the discussions . . .

When I took my son Jeremy to Germany and Austria, we visited the sites that were special to Helen and me, particularly the town of Enns, the oldest city in Austria. We mingled with the people and sat in the town square of Mondsee, watching the people strolling in the square, sitting in outdoor cafes, visiting with their family and friends. I invited Jeremy to sit on the favorite bench where Helen and I sat in the town square, facing the old church where Maria Von Trapp was married in *The Sound of Music*. We watched—old and young, teenagers, middle-aged and elderly strolling—not going anywhere, simply enjoying a relaxing evening. It was *feierabend*—“celebration of the evening,” which comes every evening after the workday is over. It is the time to relax, rest, and enjoy family and friends in social life.

Children were playing hide and seek, boys were kicking a soccer ball without a specific game plan. A little girl was riding her scooter. “Where’s her mother?” exclaimed Jeremy. She was nowhere to be seen. People weren’t anxious for their little ones. They felt secure; there was no sense of crime. It was *feierabend*—people were resting and fellowshiping.

Eventually a group of men and women marched into the square, playing “oompapa” music. They sat down in the square and soon began to entertain the people sitting in the square with pleasant, old-fashioned music. We sat, observed, listened, and were captivated by the lifestyle. I felt at home. Although this had been new to me in visiting Austria, it was not new to me from home. I grew up in a home where the evenings were spent with music; my father would play the violin, and my mother, sister, or brother played the piano. Strauss waltzes! My father loved the melodious music of Johann Strauss—and so did the rest of us. So Austria became home to me.

The people in Austria and Germany enjoy a relaxed lifestyle, spending considerable time in fellowship with family and friends. Jeremy quickly grasped the cultural model of Austria and also Germany. When we returned home he exclaimed, “Dad, you’ve ruined me!” He had grasped the culture, connected with it, and loved it!

Recently my son Terry and I visited the German Mennonite villages south of Elblag (Elbing), Poland, in what was formerly north-eastern Germany. Helen’s ancestors and my ancestors lived there in the 1500s until the late 1700s. That represents Helen’s homeland and my homeland. We found an old Mennonite cemetery with stone markers dating from the 1700s. On the front of the monument was the name of the person but on the backside, engraved in the stone, was the testimony of the person’s faith. Tears streamed down my face as I read the humble, sincere statements of faith. I’m eager to meet my family members who lived there. I’m eager to talk with them and have fellowship with them in heaven. It will be *home*.

WHAT WE LONG FOR

What are you looking for and longing for? In America, people sometimes long for the wrong things—and what they really want (although they don’t know it) and what they really need will remain elusive to them. Many think they need another car, a vacation home, the newest items in technology. They think the latest fashions in the shopping centers will satisfy their longings. They won’t.

The longing that God has placed in our hearts is for heaven, a better place, a better country. But more specifically, it is a country of our ancestry. It is our *fatherland*. It is where we will meet believing ancestors and converse and excitedly fellowship with them. We will enjoy becoming connected with *our people*, who do things in a familiar way, who speak a familiar language. It is a people with whom we will be *totally comfortable*.

Are you looking for the better country? Are you looking for your fatherland, your homeland, your home town? That is heaven! That is the deep longing in your heart—and only heaven—our family home—will satisfy that longing.