

THE END TIMES

Heaven

There is no greater joy for the Christian than the hope and assurance of heaven. For the believer, heaven is the ultimate victory, the homecoming, the place of eternal rest, the new Jerusalem, Paradise, the Promised Land. When the Savior was first promised in Genesis, God gave man a hope beyond the grave. Job knew of this hope as he looked forward to seeing his living Redeemer in the flesh. David sang in one of his psalms that when he awakened, he would see God face-to-face. Isaiah couldn't wait to "see the king in his beauty" and "view the land that stretched afar."

Modern-day Christians still have that hope, as can be seen in many of our precious hymns with words like "Jerusalem the golden, with milk and honey blest"; "O sweet and blessed country, the home of God's elect"; "Jerusalem, my happy home, name ever dear to me"; "Jerusalem, the city fair and high, would God I were in thee."

The concept of a heaven is certainly not a new one. Most heathen religions also portray a place of eternal bliss such as Nirvana (Buddhism and Hinduism), the Celestial Kingdom (Mormonism), or a sensual paradise (Islam). But their hope is a false hope that will never be realized. Their heavens are only places dreamed up by men. Instead the Christian has the assurance that a heaven with Jesus is the only real place of true hope and joy.

- Job 27:8 "For what hope has the godless when he is cut off, when God takes away his life?"
- Isaiah 44:17,18 "He bows down to it [his idol] and worships. He prays to it and says, 'Save me; you are my God.' They know nothing, they understand nothing."
- Isaiah 45:20 "Ignorant are those who carry about idols of wood, who pray to gods that cannot save."
- Jeremiah 10:5 "Like a scarecrow in a melon patch, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk."
- Romans 1:22 "Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools."
- Matthew 25:34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.'"

DISCUSS: How do we know that ours is the true heaven?

WHAT IS HEAVEN?

The word *heaven* is found over six hundred times in the Bible. It is first mentioned in Genesis 1:1 and last mentioned in Revelation 21:10. The word *heaven* has a few different meanings that we would do well to understand.

In the Old Testament especially, we see that the sky, or the expanse above the earth, is frequently referred to as heaven.

- Genesis 8:2 "Now the springs of the deep and the floodgates of the heavens had been closed, and the rain had stopped falling from the sky."
- Genesis 19:24 "Then the LORD rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah—from the LORD out of the heavens."
- Genesis 11:4 "Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.'"
- Psalm 19:1 "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands."

Thus we see that heaven can frequently mean a place above the earth. This is the same heaven in which we see the sun and moon and the billions of galaxies. It is the same heaven that the astronauts explored or that we see through a telescope on a clear night. But this is not the heaven that we know as the throne room of God, the place that Jesus is preparing for his people. The Old Testament also speaks of heaven as the special abode of God.

- Isaiah 66:1 "This is what the LORD says: 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool.'"

- Deuteronomy 26:15 "Look down from heaven, your holy dwelling place, and bless your people Israel."
- Daniel 2:28 "But there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries."

We could also say that heaven was especially designed by God and is awaiting his faithful believers.

- Hebrews 11:10 "For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God."
- John 14:2 "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."

Yet because God is in his dwelling place, we must not mistakenly think that God is not here with us as well.

- Joshua 2:11 "For the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below."

In the New Testament, heaven is seldom used to mean the sky, and it is more frequently thought of as a place where God and the angels live and the place reserved for God's people after they die.

Where heaven is located cannot be said with any certainty. We know that Jesus ascended into heaven in clear sight of his followers. But did that mean that he would no longer be with us here on earth?

- Matthew 28:20 "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Thus we might surmise that Jesus did not ascend thousands of miles above the earth. It may also be a misconception that at the time of death, we will also travel miles upon miles until we are able to behold God face-to-face. Isn't it true that God is already here with us? Might heaven then be another dimension nearby in which the veil has been lifted from our eyes and we will be in the visible presence of our Lord God? Whether that also means that we will be able to consciously see what transpires here on earth has not been revealed to us. The disciples had problems understanding Jesus when he spoke of going to heaven. They were fearful they might never see Jesus again. This was his answer:

- John 14:1-4 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. 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. You know the way to the place where I am going."

Yet Thomas still had trouble comprehending what Jesus was saying. So Jesus continued.

- John 14:5-7 "Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?'

"Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.'

There are many other descriptions of what heaven will be like. We shall look at a few of these Scripture passages.

The tree of life that once stood in the Garden of Eden will be seen by everyone.

- Revelation 2:7 "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God."

God's heaven is compared to a magnificent mansion.

- John 14:2 "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."

There will be music and singing.

- Revelation 5:8,9 "Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense. . . and they sang a new song."
- Revelation 5:13 "Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing."

And there will be blissful rest!

- Revelation 14:13 "'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labor.'
- Hebrews 4:9 "There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his."

DISCUSS: Which description of heaven gives you the most excitement?