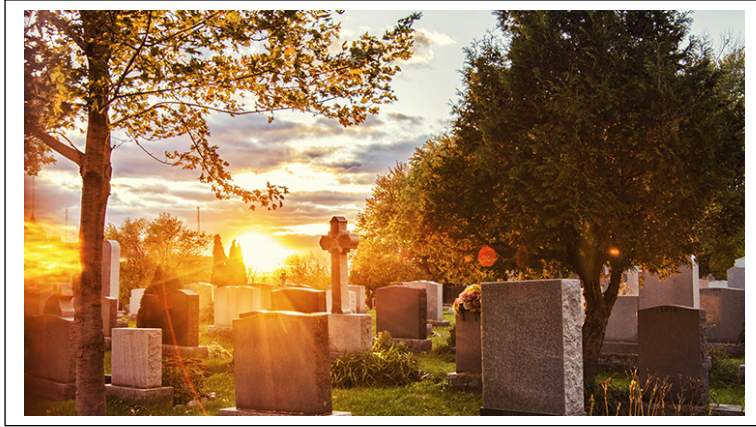


Where Do Christians Go When They Die?

- Ben C. Dunson –



Recently, my sons told me about a conversation they had with several of their friends in the neighborhood. At some point, the discussion turned to heaven, and their friends began to speculate about what it will be like. We'll have as much money as we like, toys will abound, and adventures will never end, they insisted.

As adults, we probably don't imagine heaven filled with children's favorite things, although our own speculations can be remarkably similar. Instead of toys, we imagine climbing mountains, interstellar travel, the infinite delights of unimpeded library access (or is that just me?), and on and on.

There is a danger, then, that our ideas about heaven might have more to do with sanctifying what we currently love the most about this world than they do with what the Scriptures say about where we go when we die. We must, therefore, turn to God's word if we would learn what our heavenly home will truly be like.

What Is Heaven Like?

First, heaven. Most English translations use the word *heaven* (or *heavens*) to describe both the sky (Genesis 1:1, 8; etc.) and the realm where God and his angels dwell (Job 22:12; Psalm 115:2–3; Isaiah 66:1; Matthew 5:34; Romans 1:18). These two are related, but certainly not identical. The spiritual realm of heaven, like the sky, is described as being above the earth to indicate the infinite, qualitative difference between God and everything that he has made (Matthew 14:19; Mark 16:19; 2 Corinthians 12:2; Revelation 4:1; 11:12).

The depiction of heaven as a spiritual "place," however, does not mean that God literally dwells somewhere high in the sky, or in outer space. God is a Spirit (John 4:24; Acts 7:48–50; Romans 1:20–23); he is not composed of matter, nor does he live in a physical location composed of matter. God dwells in heaven, yet he is not contained or constrained by it in any way (1 Kings 8:27). In fact, heaven is God's own creation (Colossians 1:16). To say that God is "in" heaven is another way of saying that he transcends his own creation, even as he upholds it at every moment by his word (Hebrews 1:3).

Matters become more mysterious when we think about the resurrected body of Jesus Christ, which is also now in heaven (Acts 3:20–21; 7:55–56; Hebrews 9:24; 1 Peter 3:21–22). We know that Jesus has a physical body, gloriously raised from the dead, resident *somewhere*, even though we know very little (physically speaking) of what kind of place that somewhere is. We certainly can't point to it on a map.

Although it is tempting to speculate about all of this, wisdom would keep us tethered to what is clearly revealed in the Bible. Ultimately, the Scriptures are not concerned with identifying for us the physical location of heaven. Based on what we see in Scripture, it seems best that we explain it not as some concrete place in normal space and time, but as an entirely different *kind* of place. It is a realm that transcends our universe, even as it often breaks into it (when angels appear to human sight, for example, or when God shows himself to his people).

What is central to biblical teaching is not *where* heaven is, but *what* it is. Heaven is where God dwells in the unapproachable light of his awesome majesty (1 Timothy 6:16). Death is “gain” for believers because we enter heaven, the place where we come into the fullness of Christ’s loving presence in a wholly new way, which is better than life itself (Philippians 1:21–23). It is also the place where sin (Revelation 21:8), sickness (1 Corinthians 15:42, 52–57), and sadness (Revelation 21:4) are no more, and where we live in perfect fellowship with Christ forever.

Contrary to the teaching that believers enter into a state of “soul sleep,” or unconscious resting, until the day of Christ’s return, the Bible teaches that we will enter into conscious communion with Christ upon death. As Jesus told the thief on the cross, “*Today* you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). Paul says that faithful service to Christ in this life brings with it abundant blessings, and yet it also means being “away from the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:6). He knows he still has gospel work to do, but his chief desire is to arrive finally at that day when he will be “at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8).

Resurrection of the Body

Heaven, however, as wonderful as it is, is not the final resting place for God’s people. He never meant it to be. The full effects of sin in this world have not been overcome as long as our bodies lie in the grave. God made the whole world, including our bodies, “very good” (Genesis 1:31). The death of the body is part of the curse of original sin (Genesis 2:17). It is not natural; it is not the way things are meant to be. The last enemy to be defeated by God will be death itself, when the bodies of believers are raised up on the last day (1 Corinthians 15:26, 54–57). Unbelievers also will be raised, though in bodies fitted for eternal punishment (John 5:29).

The resurrection is a physical reality. After his resurrection, Jesus ate food (Luke 24:42–43) and could be touched (John 20:17, 27). In his resurrection, he is the “firstfruits” (1 Corinthians 15:20) of the future resurrection of all believers. This is another way of saying that Jesus (in his physical, bodily resurrection) has already entered into the state that all believers will enter into when he returns to usher in the fullness of the new creation. Because of our unbreakable union with Jesus in life and death (Romans 6:5; 1 Thessalonians 4:14), what is true of him will certainly be true of us as well: we will be raised up bodily (1 Corinthians 15:12–19; Philippians 3:20–

21; Romans 8:11). Our bodies will be spiritual (1 Corinthians 15:44), not in the sense of being non-physical, but in the sense of being wholly controlled by the power of the Holy Spirit.

New Heavens, New Earth

The resurrection of the body, then, shows us that a disembodied heaven was never meant by God to last forever. There must be a physical realm for the physically raised body to dwell in. This is the new creation, which, like the resurrection body, is a physical reality. The new creation is the earth transformed by the power of God into everything he originally intended for it when he made it in the beginning. It is heaven come down to earth (Revelation 21:1–8).

The glories of the new creation far transcend the glories of the present creation, a creation that itself is staggering in its testimony to the goodness, beauty, and glory of God (Psalm 19:1–6). The world as God originally made it was “very good” (Genesis 1:31) but incomplete. It had not yet been brought into the state God intended for it, a state that Adam, Eve, and their descendants would have entered into had Adam been faithful in the work God originally gave him. This truth is seen most clearly in Revelation 22:1–5, where God’s people, in the fullness of the new creation, eat from the tree of life and live forever, without the possibility that this blessed state could ever be lost.

What will the new creation be like? As with heaven, many of our questions about the new creation simply aren’t answered in the Bible. We have every reason to believe it will be physical, but even here circumspection is required. There will be an organic connection between our present body and our resurrection body. Even so, there also will be a radical transformation of our bodies at the resurrection. Paul shows both the continuity and the discontinuity in our resurrection bodies using the image of a seed’s transformation into a full-grown plant (1 Corinthians 15:35–49). It is the same body that is raised, and yet it is so much more than merely the body as it was in this age of sin and death. It is an imperishable, glorious, powerful body (1 Corinthians 15:42–44).

Similarly, the good world God made in the beginning will not be thrown away and replaced with an immaterial, spiritual substitute. Instead, its corruption will be cleansed as it is purified of all sinful defilement (see 2 Peter 3:10–13, which speaks not of an annihilating but of a purifying fire). Romans 8:18–25 shows us that the present world, subject as it is to futility and decay because of the fall, will on the last day “be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Romans 8:21).

The new creation will be physical, a new heavens and new *earth* (Isaiah 65:17; 66:22; 2 Peter 3:13), but the biblical focus is not on the physical makeup of the new creation, or the presence or absence of the mundane earthly activities we so enjoy in this age. Rather, the focus is on the spiritual realities of the new creation: the healing of the ravages of sin among the nations, the absence of sinfully accursed things, and most importantly, seeing and worshiping Christ face-to-face, and rejoicing that his tender, loving face shines upon us (Revelation 22:1–5). We are told only what we need to know about the nature of the new creation so as to motivate our faithful service to God in the present. With this knowledge we must rest content, disciplining

our imaginations according to what has actually been revealed to us in God's word (Deuteronomy 29:29; 1 Corinthians 4:6).

Glory Awaits

In 1 Corinthians 2:9, the apostle Paul writes of heaven that "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him." In this text, we see just how much the biblical depictions of heaven, the resurrection of the body, and the new creation, as glorious as they are, cannot fully capture the glory that awaits believers after death. In the end, we can do little more than join Paul in marveling at the eternal delights that await us when we see our Savior face-to-face for the first time.

Heaven, like God himself, is a world we understand *truly*, and yet fall far short of understanding *fully*. As the apostle John wrote, "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). We shall indeed be changed (1 Corinthians 15:51). And in that glorious moment, "he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

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