

ON HEAVEN

Is Heaven really a city?

“IN THE COUNTRY that lies beyond the farthest star there is a giant, golden city. Nothing that is abominable, or evil, or false can ever enter into that celestial paradise. It is home not only to the righteous, but also to the Holy One. Its glory outshines the sun, and it is an eternal city that will never fade away.”

(Beyond the Farthest Star, prologue)

When most people think about Heaven they picture either a long and boring church service or a bunch of white clouds floating in the sky. I think both of these pictures are unbiblical. Believe it or not, the Bible consistently tells us that our eternal home is actually a city that has been built for us by God Himself. For example, take a look at this:

Hebrews 11:16: “But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.”

Notice that this verse does *not* say “God has prepared for them a cloud and a harp”! The verse is quite clear: God has prepared for us *a city*. In Revelation the apostle John is given a glimpse of this amazing place:

Revelation 21:10: “And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God,”

If you're interested in an eyewitness account of this amazing place then go read the rest of Revelation 21. The details of this heavenly metropolis are quite astonishing.

Now, to be fair, theologians don't know if this city of God is currently inhabited or not. For reasons too complex to get into right now, it's possible that the city is currently under construction and will not be unveiled until after Judgment Day. What I *do* know is that our ultimate destiny is not to float on a cloud, but to live in a city.

Do people in Heaven know what is happening on Earth?

Do people in Heaven really know what is happening back on Earth? I think there are a lot of reasons to believe that they do. Now, I don't know *how much* they are aware of, but they seem to have at least some knowledge of events. For example, Jesus once said this:

Luke 15:7: "I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance."

Jesus tells us that when a sinner repents there is joy in Heaven. This brings up an obvious question: how could people in Heaven know that a sinner has repented if they don't know what is going on? Obviously, if events on Earth are causing people in Heaven to rejoice then *people in Heaven must know about those events*.

Or take a look at this:

Hebrews 12:1: "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,"

Here Paul says that we should persevere through the trials of this life because we are surrounded by a great "cloud of witnesses." Now, in the context of a race there are two distinct groups: the people who are running in the race and the spectators who are watching. It's tempting to think that the witnesses Paul mentions are simply other people on Earth, but I think that's wrong. Why? Because all of us who are still alive *are supposed to be racing*. The only ones who are not in the race are those who have already finished it. The witnesses, then, must be people in Heaven who are watching us as we live our lives. It's a little unsettling to think that we're being watched by millions of dead people, but keep in mind that Paul *did* warn us about this.

As you can see, there is actually quite a bit of support for the idea that Heaven is aware of what God is doing on Earth.

Will we recognize other people in Heaven, and will we remember our lives?

Despite what you may have been told, I think the common idea that you forget your entire life once you set foot in Heaven is simply not Biblical. In fact, the Bible actually tells us that this is not the case. We can see this in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, which is found in Luke 16.

One thing to keep in mind when reading Luke 16 is that Jesus is *not* telling a parable. Whenever Jesus told parables He started off by saying "The kingdom of Heaven is like..." This time Jesus does not do that. Instead He matter-of-factly states that there were two people, and then He tells us what happened to them. The text itself gives every indication that Jesus was telling a true story.

First of all, notice that even though the rich man was dead, he still immediately recognized Lazarus:

Luke 16:23: "And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom."

As you can see, the rich man even recognized Abraham! As if that was not strange enough, Abraham also recognized the rich man and knew everything about his ill-spent life:

Luke 16:25: "But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented."

We can see from this passage that no one had forgotten anything. People still recognized each other, they still remembered their lives, and they even knew everything about the lives of other people – even people they had never met.

Based on this passage I think it is very reasonable to believe that we will recognize other people in Heaven and remember our lives. After all, these people did!

Are there books in Heaven?

Well, for starters, the Bible tells us of the existence of several Heavenly books. First of all, there is the Book of Life:

Philippians 4:3: “And I intreat thee also, true yokefellow, help those women which laboured with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellowlabourers, whose names are in the book of life.”

There is also the Book of Tears:

Psalms 56:8: “Thou tellest my wanderings: put thou my tears into thy bottle: are they not in thy book?”

And there is the Book of Remembrance:

Malachi 3:16: “Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name.”

From these passages we can see that there are actually several books in Heaven. However, are these the *only* books? It's possible, but it's not likely. After all, the Lord has promised to give us a city, and a city is full of all sorts of things. Think about it for a minute: what kind of things do cities have? What makes a city a city? Does it have buildings? Parks? Offices? Streets? Restaurants? Libraries? Houses?

You may be thinking “That's crazy!” – but stop and think. If Jesus had wanted to He could have said “God has prepared for them a cloud, where they will sit and be bored for all of eternity.” He could have also said “God has prepared a giant sanctuary, where the saints will sit in pews and sing hymns forever.” However, God didn't say either of those things. Instead He used a word that we're very familiar with – the word *city*. Is it really so crazy to think that God used the word “city” on purpose to give us some idea of what was in our future? After all, God *wants* us to know what Heaven is like because He wants our heart to be set on it! How can our heart be set on it if we don't know anything about it? Isn't it possible that since God used the word “city” then maybe Heaven *really is like a city, and has the sort of things a city has*?

Do cities have books? Yes, they do – and they have lots of other things as well. I think it's time we started thinking outside the box and embraced the idea that there may be more for us to do in Heaven than strum a harp.

What will life in Heaven be like?

When people think of Heaven they usually think that nothing exciting or fun ever happens there. During their lifetime on Earth they may have had an exciting career and served as a photographer, or an artist, or a musician, or whatever. However, they believe that once you die that's it. It's up to you to have all the fun you can now because there is absolutely *nothing* to do in Heaven. Your whole eternity consists of sitting on a cloud, being bored out of your mind. On top of that, if God called you to be a missionary and you gave up a promising career as a theoretical physicist, well, that career is just over. Sorry.

Even though this rather dour view is quite common, I don't believe it is accurate. In fact, I think it is a gross distortion of what Heaven is really like. The city God has built for us not a boring or dull place where nothing ever happens. Quite to the contrary! I believe there is even *more* going on there than there is now on Earth.

Why do I think this? Well, first, there's the fact that our destiny is to *live in a city*, not sit on a cloud. Things happen in cities – there are jobs and opportunities and all sorts of things. The mere fact that we will be living in a city implies that there will be activity, life, and vibrancy! On top of that, there is explicit Biblical support for this idea. For example, in the parable of the talents the Lord rewards His servants for a life well-lived. When He does this He does *not* take away what they had before and then tell them to go sit on a cloud. No, what He actually does is *give them even more than they already had*:

Matthew 25:20: “And so he that had received five talents came and brought other five talents, saying, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me five talents: behold, I have gained beside them five talents more.

21: His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.”

The five talents the servant was entrusted with were not taken away, and the Lord did not seize the extra five talents the servant earned. In fact, this man ended up getting even more talents to manage:

Matthew 25:28: “Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents.

29 For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.”

It's very exciting to realize that the word the Lord uses to describe our future lives is *abundance*, not boredom! The Lord obviously expected this man to keep on managing the 11 talents he now had, on top of doing a whole bunch of new and more exciting things. The point is crystal clear: in the afterlife God does not take away our talents and abilities and leave us with nothing to do. Instead God expects us to *keep using what He gave us earlier* while He gives us *even more things to do*!

In other words, God gave us abilities and He wants us to use them to bring Him glory *forever*. These abilities are not taken away in the next life; instead they are enhanced and added to. Moreover, God doesn't give us talents that we can never use. It's quite possible that the abilities we never had a chance to use in this life were meant to be used in the next life instead.

Is there sadness in Heaven?

I am sure this idea will come as a surprise to many people. After all, didn't the Bible say this?

Revelation 21:4: “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”

The Bible does indeed say that there will be no more sorrow, crying, or pain. However, the problem is that this verse is often taken out of context. The promise that God makes in this passage does not come to pass until *after* Judgment Day. This is quite obvious if you read Revelation 20 and 21 in their entirety, but even this one verse hints at it. Notice that one of the promises is that there will be “no more death.” When is death finally destroyed once and for all? On Judgment Day. Has death been destroyed yet? No. So that right there tells us that this is still in the future.

On top of that, there is actually a recorded case where a group of people in Heaven were upset about something. We find that here:

Revelation 6:9: “And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held:

10 And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?

11 And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled.”

Here we have a group of saints who were martyred for their faith in God. These people are clearly in Heaven. Are they blissfully at peace, without a care in the world? No, they are not. In fact, they are actually crying out to God and asking Him to avenge their blood. They want to see His wrath poured out upon the people who killed them. It's important to keep in mind that if you're begging God to avenge your blood, the chances are very good that you are *not happy*. That's not a request that happy and content people usually make.

Is there anything sinful with their request? No, there isn't. God doesn't rebuke them for it; instead He tells them to be patient for a little while longer and then He will do as they ask. Nor is there anything wrong with them asking for vengeance; after all, God did say that vengeance belonged to Him. These people are simply asking God to keep the promise He had made. Is there anything strange with the idea that people who were brutally murdered for believing in Jesus might want justice to be done? I don't think so.

Here is another way to think about it. We know that Jesus (who is in Heaven) cares very deeply for us. He understands what we are going through because He was tempted as well:

Hebrews 4:15: “For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.”

Do you really think that Jesus is indifferent to our pain? Do you think that He feels nothing when His children are hunted down, put in prison, and are murdered? Do you believe that all of our troubles in our life mean absolutely nothing to Him? Of course not! That's ridiculous. God is not a

callous, unfeeling monster. He has tremendous love and compassion for His children.

So the question is, if we are in Heaven and we are like Christ, does it really make sense that Jesus would care and we would *not* care? Is that reasonable? Personally, I think it's much more likely that we will share the emotions – and the compassion – of our Lord.

Are there mansions in Heaven?

Are there really mansions in Heaven? Is there any truth to this, or is it just a popular misconception? Well, first of all, the idea of heavenly mansions comes from the King James Version of the Bible. In that particular translation John 14:2 reads like this:

John 14:2: "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you."

The word “mansion” in that verse is the Greek word “mone” (Strong's #3438). It means “a staying, i.e. residence (the act or the place):—abode, mansion.” All other modern translations of the Bible render the word as “rooms.”

On the surface, “rooms” makes a lot of sense. “In my Father's house are many rooms” is a plausible and reasonable translation. After all, a house does have rooms! I've never seen a house yet that had mansions inside. The problem is that the word “mone” actually means dwelling place. Implying that we will all be living together in one big house is quite misleading – much more misleading, I think, than translating the word to mean mansion.

Here is what I mean. In Luke 16 we have one of the most misunderstood parables in the Bible – the parable of the unrighteous steward. At the end of the parable Jesus sums up its message like this:

Luke 16:8: “And the lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely: for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light.

9 And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations.”

Jesus is saying that we should use our earthly wealth to help other people, so that when we're in Heaven they will remember what we've done and will invite us into their homes. I know that sounds pretty shocking, but that really is what the passage means! Verse 9 clearly states that we're to “make to yourselves friends” with the “mammon of unrighteous”, which is simply our earthly wealth. The reason we're supposed to do that is so “they may receive you into everlasting habitations” – or, to put it a bit more clearly, “so they will receive you into their heavenly home.”

For the record, this verse is *not* saying that lost people should make friends with saved people so that the saved people can bail them out of Hell. That is blatantly unbiblical; Christ Himself said that people who end up in Hell cannot escape and are trapped there forever. This verse is talking about Christians being invited into the heavenly home of other Christians.

Now, if everyone lives in different rooms in one big heavenly house then this passage makes no sense, because you can't be invited into someone else's home *if you already live with them*. Luke 16:9 only makes sense *if each person has their own, separate estate*. For that reason I do not think we will all be sharing the same house, and that is why I think the modern translation of John 14:2 is misleading.

“In my Father's house are many rooms” sounds a great deal like “we will all live together in some kind of giant commune”, which is not correct. We will each have our own, individual homes.

As far as the size of the estate goes – Jesus told His disciples repeatedly that they were to store up their treasures in Heaven. In the parables of the talents He made it clear that the reward He would give us for our earthly service was far out of proportion to what we had actually done. In other words, God has promised to give us *far more than we deserve*. Is it really reasonable to think that when we finally reach Heaven after a lifetime of service and are shown our eternal home, that all we'll find waiting for us is a tiny, unfurnished, one-bedroom apartment? Keep in mind that this is the same God who decided that the Earth needed a night-light and so created *billions of galaxies* to provide it. This is also the same God who uses gold for pavement! I find it very difficult to believe that *any* home on Earth (even the most extravagant ones) will be better than what God has prepared for us in Heaven.

To put this another way: can you really imagine someone going to Heaven and saying “Man! My house back in Chicago was much better than this place. In fact, I've seen closets that were bigger than this!” Personally, I don't think so. No one in Heaven is going to be looking back at Earth and saying “Life was so much better there.”

Will the Earth be restored? Is there really going to be a new heavens and earth?

A lot of people don't realize this, but our eternal home is *not* going to be in Heaven. It is actually going to be here, on Earth. This will come as a surprise to many people, but the Bible is quite clear about it. I honestly do not understand why so few people know this.

I suppose I had better explain where this idea comes from. First of all, we all know that when believers die they go on to be with Jesus in Heaven. Then, at some point in history, Judgment Day will occur. This is what the Bible has to say about it:

Revelation 20:11: “And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them.

12 And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.

13 And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works.

14 And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.

15 And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.”

One interesting thing we learn is that during this judgment Hell is emptied (verse 13). However, as verse 15 points out, those who are not saved are not cast back into Hell but instead are cast into the Lake of Fire – a completely separate and different place. We know that Hell and the Lake of Fire are different places because verse 14 tells us that Hell itself is cast into the Lake of Fire. Hell, then, is *not* the final resting place of the unrighteous. Technically speaking, *no one will spend eternity in Hell*. It is simply a holding place until Judgment Day. The final place of torment for those who did not believe in

Jesus is, as verse 15 points out, the Lake of Fire.

What about those who *did* believe in Jesus? Well, as it turns out, Revelation 20 is not the last chapter in the Bible. John goes on to explain what happens *after* Judgment Day, and what he says is quite surprising:

Revelation 21:1: “And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.

2 And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

3 And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

4 And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”

Let's take this one piece at a time. Verse 1 tells us that the current universe – the sky, the stars, and the Earth itself – are destroyed. However, God then makes a *new* heaven and Earth. The word “new” here is a special one: it carries with it the idea of something that has been restored to its former glory. It's not like trading in an old car for a new one. Instead, it's like taking that old car and remodeling it until it's better-than-new.

What God is saying is that after Judgment Day, He's not just going to get rid of the universe and then that's it. Instead He is going to make a *new* universe – a restored one. He is going to remake this planet and put it back to the way it was before mankind sinned. Verse 2 tells us that after God does this He is going to move the New Jerusalem (the heavenly city He built) *to this new earth*. Why? So that He can live with men. In other words, God is going to recreate the planet Earth, put us back on it, and then *move Heaven to Earth so He can live with us forever*. That is the exciting truth: we are going to spend eternity *right here on Earth*, and God is going to move here and live with us.

Will there be rivers and trees in the heavenly city?

Yes there is! This is what Revelation 22 has to say:

Revelation 22:1: “And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.

2 In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.”

As you can see, the heavenly city really does have a river, and there really are trees. Heaven is *not* just a giant cloud that floats in a big void of nothingness.

Will there actually be mornings and afternoons in Heaven?

No, I don't think so. Since Heaven is lit by the glory of God and does not need the sun, I don't see how there could possibly be mornings or afternoons. However, I *do* believe that there will be time in Heaven. We find this in the book of Revelation:

Revelation 8:1: "And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour."

If half an hour went by in Heaven then time must pass there! The reason most people think that time doesn't exist in Heaven is because of a misinterpretation of these verses:

Revelation 10:5: "And the angel which I saw stand upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his hand to heaven,
6 And swore by him that liveth for ever and ever, who created heaven, and the things that therein are, and the earth, and the things that therein are, and the sea, and the things which are therein, that there should be time no longer:
7 But in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the mystery of God should be finished, as he hath declared to his servants the prophets."

In verse 6 the angel does indeed say that "there should be time no longer", but all the angel was actually saying was that the mystery of God would no longer be a mystery because its time had run out. It's like a teacher standing up at the end of an exam and saying "Pencils down, class, your allotted time is over." The angel is *not* saying that time itself has stopped. After all, if time itself stopped then nothing else could ever happen! Everyone would be frozen in place.

But as far as afternoons and mornings go – that is different. The New Jerusalem is lit by the glory of God so it has no night. If the sun doesn't rise and set then there can't be mornings or afternoons. Think about it: our entire clock is based on the fact that the sun rises and sets. Without that you'd need to come up with a whole different scheme of measuring time. After all, what does twelve o'clock even mean if there's no sun directly overhead? We can see that there is clearly time in Heaven, but how days are measured (if they are measured at all) is something that remains to be seen.

Will we reign over things in the afterlife?

This idea that we will one day reign over things may sound bizarre, but it is quite Biblical. In fact, this idea comes from Jesus Himself. In one of His parables He talked about rewarding people for their faithful service, and the reward that was given to them was authority over cities:

Luke 19:17: "And he said unto him, Well, thou good servant: because thou hast been faithful in a very little, have thou authority over ten cities."

But that's not the only support there is for this. Revelation also echoes this same idea:

Revelation 5:9: "And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the

book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation;
10 And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth."

Look at verse 10: the people in Heaven are saying that God has made them *kings and priests*. What was their destiny? *To reign on the earth*. Nor is this the only passage that talks about it! Look at what John has to say about the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem:

Revelation 21:24: "And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it."

Here we are told that the *kings of the earth* would bring treasures into the heavenly city. That tells me that there must still be kings! So there is actually quite a bit of evidence that reigning is in our future. After all, Jesus did make that promise to His disciples:

Matthew 19:28: "And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

And Jesus always keeps His promises.

Will there be corporations and businesses in the heavenly city?

The idea that there might be corporations in Heaven may be shocking, but stop and think about it for a moment. Isn't it plausible that in that heavenly city people will form teams and work together to accomplish things? Isn't it also possible that certain very large challenges might require large teams, and that those teams may need to work together for an extended period of time?

At their core, businesses are groups of people who are working together to accomplish a specific goal. I will admit that in this life the goal is usually to make money in any way possible, but there are not-for-profit organizations even today. Given that God has built a heavenly city for us and that cities are full of people who work together to accomplish things, I think it's quite possible that there might be formally-established groups that have dedicated themselves to reaching a certain goal.

Now, when people think of "problems" they tend to think of crime, or world hunger, or poverty, or something like that. But there are also mathematical challenges, scientific riddles, space exploration, and all sorts of other things. There are forests to traverse, literal mountains to climb, and so on. Even if mankind had never sinned the world would still be full of challenges, mysteries, and opportunities. I see no reason to believe that the abolition of sin and death would make all of these things go away – especially if God expects us to continue to use all of the abilities that He has given to us.

Will there be computers and software developers in the heavenly city?

Now, I will admit that I have no idea if there are computers in Heaven or not. It's quite possible that the people in Heaven have moved on to something far more advanced, and computers are as

primitive to them as stone knives and bearskins are to us. However, there is almost certainly some kind of technology in Heaven, and it's very likely that whatever technology exists in Heaven is far more advanced than what exists here.

The reason I believe this is because God has promised us a city (Hebrews 11:16). Cities, by their very nature, incorporate a certain level of technology. After all, you can just glance at a photograph of a town and tell how advanced it is. Is the city made of mud huts or log cabins? Does it have brick houses or glass-and-steel skyscrapers? How advanced are the buildings? What engineering principles are reflected in their designs? What amenities are offered? Do the houses have windows? If so, are they just empty holes or are there panes of glass?

The very design of a city reflects the character, knowledge, and skill of the people who built it. The New Jerusalem, the heavenly city, is no different. Since it was built by God, it will reflect *His* character, His knowledge, and His skill. Do you really believe that our modern cities are going to make God's city look primitive by comparison?

I find it very difficult to believe that people are going to enter Heaven and say “My goodness! Everyone here is a caveman who bangs rocks together. I've seen more advanced knowledge in the lost tribes of Papua New Guinea.” Do you really think that the streets of gold are going to be lined with mud huts?

So there may not be computers, but I do believe that the technology and skill in that heavenly city will be astonishing. After all, the city was built by God Himself! I don't know if there will be software developers there or not, but any time there is high technology there will be people who are skilled in using it to solve complex problems.