

Eternity: Is “heaven” where we’re headed?

“...there is not one single reference [in the Bible] to ‘heaven’ as the eternal destiny of the believer.” – Richard Middleton

The above might come as a shock to many Christians, but it is true. What then are we to make of ‘heaven’? The idea of the coming of a completely new state of affairs in ‘eternity’, with an end to suffering, sin and death is rightly a source of great encouragement to believers. But in the popular imagination, the faithful believer is transported after death to a place called ‘heaven’ where they will live for eternity with God. This



is rarely questioned, but is it actually biblical? To answer this, we need to grasp what the bible writers meant when they wrote about heaven. Only then can we unravel the confusion that often surrounds this subject.

What is heaven? – common confusions

Confusion 1: Heaven is non-physical

It is often imagined that people in heaven will have no physical bodies but will consist purely of ‘spirit’, existing in a non-corporeal state. This idea has more to do with ancient Greek philosophy than the Bible. The Greeks saw the physical world as less important and less ‘real’ than the invisible non-physical world. Gnosticism believed matter is evil and must be destroyed, whilst Stoicism said that the physical world would burn up and be reborn exactly the same, like the Phoenix. The Bible, however, does not think this way but presents a God who will cleanse and transform the physical creation. Eternity will involve a physical universe. According to Romans 8:18-25, creation is waiting for its liberation, not its destruction! Our resurrection will involve creation being restored and fully renewed.

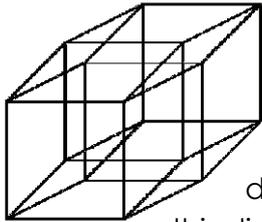
Confusion 2: Heaven is somewhere else

Much preaching and many songs assume that the goal of the Christian life is to be transported away from here to a ‘heaven’ somewhere else. ‘I’m just passing through,’ or ‘I’m going home’ are common phrases.



People point to Philippians 3:19-21 and say, ‘We are citizens of heaven,’ and assume that means we will one day go there away from earth. But that passage specifically says, ‘we await a saviour from there.’ The

image is of a Roman colony (like Philippi) which depended on Rome for its defence and support. The Roman citizens of Philippi would never expect to one day go and live in Rome. Rather, they knew that if things got difficult the Roman emperor and his armies would come to Philippi and rescue them! The direction of travel is *from* Rome. In fact, they were there to bring the culture of Rome to Philippi, not retreat back to Rome. Similarly, as citizens of heaven, we are in the world to bring the culture and the standards of heaven to where we are, not to leave the world to its devices and retreat to heaven. We are a 'colony of heaven' on earth.



Rather than thinking of heaven as a location somewhere far away, it is better to think (as the Bible writers do) of heaven as God's dimension of reality, normally invisible, where his will is perfectly done and his presence experienced fully. At present, this dimension runs in parallel with the earthly dimension but is separated from it temporarily because of sin. However, the intention is for full reunification, which we shall see later.

Heaven is where God's purposes for us are stored up. So, when 1 Peter 1:4 says there is an inheritance 'kept in heaven for you', it is not that we must go there to get it, but rather it will be kept safe until the time when it comes to us for us to enjoy where we are – like a Christmas present hidden for a while from a child.

Confusion 3: Heaven is outside time

Heaven is not a future state but, as stated above, it is God's dimension of present reality in the here and now. Neither should it be confused with the phrase 'eternal life', which some take to mean 'outside of time'. In fact, by 'eternal life' it is fairly certain that bible writers like Paul and John were not referring to *timelessness* or *endless time* but rather to the '*life of the age to come*'. They understood that through the Messiah there was to be a new age of the Spirit, a new creation, when the dead would be raised and all would be put right. But Jesus' resurrection and the outpoured Spirit showed that this age had already begun without the old age having ended. They lived 'between the times', in the 'time of the end', the new age having been inaugurated but not consummated. They had 'tasted the... powers of the coming age,' (Heb 6:5). The life of that age – eternal life – had begun now and would continue forever.



Confusion 4: Heaven will replace the earth

2 Peter 3:5-13 is often used to support the claim that the earth is to be destroyed and replaced with something else – heaven, perhaps. However, the passage also refers to the world being 'destroyed' by Noah's flood, when in fact it did not disappear – rather it was radically

changed and in fact cleansed. The word 'destroy' used in this passage about the flood is actually stronger than the word used to describe the effect of the fire. The fire 'looses', 'dissolves' or 'breaks', whereas the flood 'utterly destroyed'. The language is in the 'apocalyptic' style, used in books like Revelation and Daniel, where the extreme dramatic imagery is not intended to be taken literally. We should see this passage as reference to *cleansing* fire that removes evil and radically transforms the world. Just as after the flood the world continued, so after the fire of the final judgement the world will continue but be different – 'a new heaven *and* a new earth'.



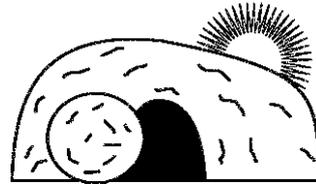
Discussion time...

Thinking about the common misconception that eternity will be spent in a 'heaven' away from this world, with the present creation destroyed and done away with, how might this affect:

- Our approach to environmental concerns
- The likelihood of our taking 'social action' in communities

Part 2: The authentic Christian hope

The authentic Christian hope, rooted in its original Jewish context, was always for a bodily resurrection into a renewed physical world with God's presence fully present once more. Resurrection is more than some kind of survival of the soul after death. It is the future gift of a glorious and indestructible new body, suited for life in the age to come, guaranteed and exemplified by the resurrection of Christ. We will have bodies 'like his glorious body' (Php 3:21) which can never die again but are just as physical and 'real' as our present bodies. C.S. Lewis suggested that they will be even *more* real and physical than now¹. What we will be doing when that new age fully comes we do not yet know, but it will be glorious, creative, joy-filled, free and satisfying. We will be fulfilling our original and true mandate to be God's image in the created universe, spreading the knowledge and influence of God everywhere we go – a true royal priesthood (1 Pet 2:9), a kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:6).



Reunification of heaven and earth

Rev 21:3-4 'Look! God's dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death" or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'

The book of Revelation describes the age to come as a kind of restored garden of Eden – now in the form of a garden city. The new creation echoes the original purpose and bliss of the original one when God walked with Adam and Eve in the garden. Separation came because of sin, but in the renewed creation there is no more divide. God is now present in visible fullness so there is no need for a temple or even light.

Rather than the church being taken away to heaven, heaven arrives on the earth. The city (the bride) comes 'down out of heaven from God' (Rev 21:10, Rev 3:12). The direction of travel is earthward, not away from the earth. The image is of God coming to join his people, not the other way round.

1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 is usually interpreted as our leaving the earth to be with God. However, the 'coming' (parousia) or 'presence' of the Lord refers to a specific practice of a ruler arriving at a city to be welcomed by its residents and accompanied on the final stage of his journey *to the city*. Hence it is not Jesus who comes half-way down from heaven, meets us, then does a U-turn and



¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*

takes us away to heaven! Rather it is we who do the U-turn and accompany him back to a restored and renewed earth. Parousia, the royal presence of God, is more than just his coming – it is about his tangible presence with us where we are. The eternal future is one where heaven and earth have been reintegrated and God dwells permanently and visibly with his people.

What happens when we die?

People sometimes talk about 'mansions' awaiting them in heaven (taken from Jesus' words in John 14:2 – 'In my Father's house are many rooms.')



But Howard Snyder² writes:

Biblically, heaven's 'mansions' are temporary. They are not the end of the story. The 'rooms' or 'dwelling places' Jesus promises in John 14:2 make up the interim guesthouse where the saints wait for Jesus to bring them back to earth, their true home, with their transformed bodies. This is, after all, the point of Jesus' return 'with power and great glory'; 'the time . . . for God to restore everything,' as promised (Acts 3:21), the time when God's will truly is done on earth as in heaven. Presumably this resting place (described figuratively in Revelation as 'under the altar') is where God's people who have passed from this life rest and wait, and where the martyrs cry out to God, 'How long?' (Rev 6:9–11).

This suggests that Christians who die before the return of Christ will be conscious, with God, but looking forward to their resurrection in the new age. Paul anticipated that on his death he would be with Christ ('which is better by far,' Php 1:23, see also 2 Cor 5) but this is only a temporary stage – sometimes referred to as the 'intermediate state' or, biblically, 'Paradise'. Paradise was a Jewish way of referring to the temporary place of rest before rising again from the dead.



What happens with those who have not accepted Christ in this life is less clear. However, the Jewish expectation was that all went to the grave 'Sheol' (Hebrew) or 'Hades' (Greek) and there awaited the final day of judgement. Later, it was believed that the grave had two areas, one being Paradise (Abraham's side, Luke 16:22), the other being a place of torment – but not 'hell'. (We will look at this in a future session.) What is clear is that at the end of the age there will be a resurrection of both groups of people (Acts 24:15, Dan 12:2, Jn 5:28-29) and Hades will be emptied.

² *Salvation Means Creation Healed: The Ecology of Sin and Grace: Overcoming the Divorce Between Earth and Heaven*, Howard A. Snyder with Joel Scandrett, Wipf and Stock, 2011

Final thoughts: Bringing heaven here

Our hope of resurrection and a new created order, including a renewed earth, does more than comfort us in our present troubles and encourage evangelism to 'save souls'. It provides a motivation for and validates our present efforts to improve this world. Whether we are engaged in care for the natural environment or whether we are teachers, social workers or those with political involvement, we are not just keeping things tidy before everything is replaced. We are helping to care for God's world, and to rebuild society to be like God. This will not be complete before the return of Christ, but nothing is wasted. Our work anticipates the coming age but also puts it into effect in the present.



In ways that we cannot yet fully understand, the fruits of our efforts will carry through to the new creation. Richard Stearns said: *'focusing almost exclusively on the afterlife reduces the importance of what God expects of us in this life. The kingdom of God [in us] was intended to change and challenge everything in our fallen world in the here and now. It was not meant to be a way to leave the world but rather the means to actually redeem it.'*



All of this will reach its climax with our glorious resurrection and the full dawning of the new age, but for now our job is to see God's will being done, his kingdom coming, in the here and now, just as it is in heaven.

"Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of God's new project not to snatch people away from earth to heaven but to colonize earth with the life of heaven. That, after all, is what the Lord's Prayer is about."

– Tom Wright