

What Does the Bible Teach About Heaven?

Text: John 14:2

Suggested Hymns:

111, 490, 210, 343, 106

- 1) What and where is heaven
- 2) Glimpses of heaven
- 3) Some common questions
- 4) Heaven is nearer than we think

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is John 14:2, ***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.*** (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

There are various notions of Heaven. Almost everywhere where people are found, there are believers in a hereafter, a life which is to come, a "heaven."

The idea of immortality is a natural part of man's consciousness, and he can deny it only with the greatest of difficulty. But when we get on the subject of what that afterlife might be, we find that the agreement is not quite so general.

The inventions of human minds in this field range all the way from the Buddhist's Nirvana, in which a soul finds complete joy in just being allowed to stop living — relieved of the painful necessity of having to come back and live again in another form — to the Mohammedan notion of heaven, which would delight the most sensual worldling, a place where every human appetite will find unlimited satisfaction.

And between these two ideas, which, incidentally, are seriously held by many of our fellow creatures, there are many more private heavens which people have devised for themselves, usually based more on wishes than on actual information.

But, as always, the eternal Word of God is our only reliable guide. The heaven of which the Bible speaks is a very real place where our faithful loved

ones have gone to live, and it should excite the intense interest of every child of God who looks forward to spending eternity in the heavenly mansions.

Last Thursday the Church celebrated the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ into heaven. Therefore let us consider the question, *What Does the Bible Teach About Heaven?* May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. What And Where Is Heaven?

The words of our text, which certainly do not represent all that the Bible teaches about heaven, were spoken by the Lord Jesus in the Upper Room on the night of His betrayal.

We try to read His thoughts in these solemn moments when only He could see the path that lay before Him. Clearly outlined was the road to Calvary. Heavy on His shoulders and on His heart was the burden of the world's sin — including yours and mine — for which He must atone.

But even here Jesus finds time to be concerned with the fears and doubts of His bewildered friends. Some verses previously Jesus had addressed His disciples as *"little children."*¹ And it occurs to us that some of our wondering about heaven is like the wondering of little children. But He is ever so patient with it.

Jesus wants us to have all the understanding we can gather from His Word. And doesn't it sound like a remark to little children to hear Jesus say in our text, *"if it were not so, I would have told you?"* As if to say, "You can trust Me implicitly; I would never think of deceiving you, especially in this."

Of course, it would be a great deal easier if there were somewhere in the Bible a chapter which had no other purpose than to give us a complete description of our heavenly home. But we look in vain for such a passage.

Even those dazzling pictures of heaven that we find in the Book of Revelation almost make it seem further away than nearer. Our search through the Scriptures will remind us more of a prospector panning for gold, but the shining grains are there, and they are infinitely more precious than gold.

The Bible teaches, for one thing, that heaven is not just a condition, as some people have thought, but a real place, or how could Jesus have said in our text, *"I go to prepare a place for you"?* He called it *"My Father's house,"* and on

the next day before another sun would set over Jerusalem, Jesus would be heard assuring the dying thief at His side, ***“Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.”***²

The Bible does not teach us where heaven is or is not. The Scriptures never make an attempt to locate the heavenly mansions.

But I dare say that if someone were to ask you suddenly, ***“Where is heaven?”*** your eyes would instinctively travel upward before you could speak a word. And we got that impression from the Bible, from beginning to end.

The Psalmist speaks of heaven as being ***“high above the earth.”***³ The children of Israel implored God in Deuteronomy 26:15, ***“Look down from Your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless Your people Israel.*** And we cannot forget what the Scriptures say of the Lord’s own ascension: ***“He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.”***⁴

And as the disciples stood there, frozen in amazement, trying perhaps to catch just one more glimpse of their beloved Master, two angels suddenly stood near them, saying, ***“Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.”***

After this experience the disciples no doubt always thought of heaven as being above, on high. They had seen their beloved Master go up, ascending higher and higher, until a cloud removed Him from their sight. Heaven to them was up above, somewhere beyond the blue sky. We, too, are to think of it in the same way.

But really this can hardly be regarded as important. If we know that heaven is the Father’s house, we can be content to let its location come as a discovery.

But someone might feel like saying, ***“All this is not very definite; can’t we be a little more explicit about these things?”*** It is probably fortunate for us that we have not been given an accurate description of the heavenly home. Someone has said that ***“no doubt one reason why more knowledge has not been given to us is that the glorious vision would unfit us for present duty.”***⁵

Recall that St. Paul experienced visions and revelations of the Lord as written in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4, ***“I know a man in Christ who fourteen years***

ago — whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows — such a one was caught up to the third heaven. ³ And I know such a man — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows — ⁴ how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

How could we ever again apply ourselves to the demands of this earthly life if we had once seen the glories of eternity?

2. Glimpses of Heaven

Instead, our picture of heaven comes to us in fleeting glimpses, as the Bible uses many symbols and images to keep it before us. It is called a kingdom,⁶ because in our human way of thinking we like to think of royal palaces as being very pleasant.

It is referred to, for our benefit, as paradise,⁷ because in our imagination we rather enjoy walking about among the beauties of Eden. It is called an unfading inheritance,⁸ because we like to think of ourselves as becoming suddenly rich. It is called a rest⁹ for the people of God, because we often grow weary, and it is called the crown of life,¹⁰ because we like to think of ourselves as rulers and conquerors.

The Scriptures also give us descriptions of heaven in positive and negative terms. There are probably more negative than positive expressions in Scripture concerning heaven. The Bible follows a plan of telling us what is not there rather than what is there. But there is abundant comfort in both of these expressions.

There is no evil in heaven. In this earthly life sin is the trademark and the cause of all misery and woe. But the citizens of heaven are delivered from every evil of body and soul.

The widow of the great composer Johann Sebastian Bach tells in a biography written after his death that the consuming passion of his life was to be delivered from a world and a body that were marked by sin. This might well explain some of the glory of his music.

In heaven temptation and stumbling will be no more remembered. There we shall finally know the meaning of Paul's words, "*holy and without blemish.*"¹¹

And because that is true, the Bible also says in Revelation 21:4, *there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.*”

And in Revelation 7:16–17, ¹⁶ *They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat;* ¹⁷ *for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*”

On the other hand, not all of our information is negative. In His High-priestly Prayer, which was spoken also in those solemn moments of Holy Thursday night, Jesus said in John 17:24, ²⁴ *“Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory.”*

When we are finally with Jesus, the things which our earthly eyes could not look upon will be ours to behold continually. And even that is not all. The children of God shall not only see His glory, but they shall have a partnership in it. In this same prayer Jesus also said, as we read in John 17:22, ²² *And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one.*”

What this actually means is far beyond our understanding, but it can fill us with the joyous assurance that, as John says, *“when He shall appear, we shall be like Him.”*¹² No matter how much God has chosen to withhold from us, it is enough for us to know that we shall be like Jesus.

3. Some Common Questions

But we are so constituted that we have a lot of questions. And they are not questions which should be gruffly brushed aside and labelled as “mere curiosity.” This is a thirst for knowledge for which we need never apologise, because it has been planted in us by God Himself. So let us bring our questions to God’s Word and see if they are answered there.

A person may ask, *“Will this same body, the only one God gave me for this life, be my body in heaven, too?”* Job answers that question when he says by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, in Job 19:26–27, ²⁶ *And after my skin is destroyed,*

this I know, That in my flesh I shall see God, ²⁷ Whom I shall see for myself, And my eyes shall behold, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!

On the day of resurrection our bodies will be made alive again. Paul writes to the Romans, ***“He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit.”***¹³

No matter how long since they have returned to the dust from which they came, their rising to life will be no problem for Jesus who is ***“the Resurrection and the Life.”***¹⁴ Again, Paul says, as we read in 1 Corinthians 15:53, ⁵³ ***For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.***

We can easily anticipate the next question, ***“Won’t there be some change and some difference?”*** Most certainly there will. And the Bible proof is most exact, as we read in 1 Corinthians 15:52, ⁵² ***in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.***

The same Apostle Paul tells the Philippians, ***“will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body.”***¹⁵ Remember Easter Sunday? The Easter accounts help us understand a little of this matter.

It was the same Jesus on Easter Sunday as before, and yet in a way that must almost have mystified the disciples, there was something different about Jesus.

Jesus suddenly appeared in the middle of the room that was locked, and He could just as suddenly disappear. The disciples could recognise Jesus as their Friend of long standing, but they noticed that He was not observing the same limitations as previously.

They even knew that when Jesus asked them for food and ate it in their presence, He was doing it more for the benefit of their understanding, rather than to sustain His glorious, resurrected body. It was the same body, and yet it was changed and different.

And we, and all those whom we long to see again, shall be like Jesus.

That leads on to the next question: ***“Do we really have the right to speak of reunion in heaven? Shall we know one another there?”*** The Bible doesn’t answer this question as exactly as we may like, but it does help us to infer some plain facts.

Will a father know his children who may have changed somewhat in appearance after he left them on earth? Will the child who always had to say, "*I was too young to remember Mother,*" be at a complete loss to recognise her in heaven? You see, it is an even more complicated question than we think.

The answer lies in this: When we are raised in glory, there will have been restored to us the image of God, like Adam at his creation, including all the marvellous faculties that he had. Need we worry any longer about this?

Remember that at the Transfiguration of Jesus that Peter, James, and John recognised Moses and Elijah.¹⁶ We shall not only recognise the ones we knew on earth, but we shall recognise the saints of all the ages. We shall know Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and we may feel like complimenting them on the way they kept the faith, even though they had no Bible as we have today.

We shall be able to ask Samuel and David and Isaiah how it felt to believe in a Christ who was yet to come. We shall talk with the disciples, and Mary and Joseph, and Mary and Martha.

When that time comes, we shall be surprised that we ever asked this question. Nor do we need to have any doubts or misgivings about heaven's completeness. These things are not only happy prospects of the future, but they are glorious certainties, as sure as the promises of God themselves.

4. Heaven Is Nearer Than We Think

The promises of God are nearer to us than we think. Our human nature makes the mistake of relegating things like these to the vague and distant future, as though they were in no way related to the present. We need to remind ourselves that the everlasting blessedness which is the first fruit of the Christian faith does not begin when life is over, or when the Judgement has struck, but it begins when Christ takes possession of our hearts.

The highest compliment that can be paid to this sad world is to call it the entry or the foyer of the heaven that is just beyond. We ought never to think of heaven's blessedness as being very far away.

It even reaches down into our earthly lives in so many ways. Anything that tells us of the love of God, especially His assurance of pardon and peace, is a little prophecy and foretaste of heaven.

It is said that the voyagers of old who used to sail out in search of all kinds of precious commodities would detect the presence of land in the spicy breezes that blew toward them even long before they came in sight of land. And we have similar encouragements as we travel on toward our heavenly home.

For the redeemed of God everything points to that hour when we shall be brought into the eternal mansions to join with all the choirs of heaven, ***“To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, ... to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever.”***¹⁷ Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ John 13:33

² Luke 23:43

³ Psalm 103:11

⁴ Acts 1:9

⁵ Golladay, The Apostles' Creed.

⁶ Heb 12:28, Luke 22:29

⁷ Luke 23:43, 2 Cor 12:4, Rev 2:7

⁸ 1 Peter 1:4, Heb 9:15

⁹ Heb 4:9

¹⁰ James 1:12, Rev 2:10

¹¹ Ephesians 5:27

¹² 1 John 3:2

¹³ Romans 8:11

¹⁴ John 11:25

¹⁵ Philippians 3:21

¹⁶ Matt 17:2

¹⁷ Revelation 1:5-6