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Reformation
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A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

Volume 6, Number 2 • Spring 1997

Whatever Happened to Heaven?

John Blanchard

There is a sense in which virtually the entire Bible focuses on man's eternal destiny, and in particular the destiny of God's chosen people. In both Old Testament and New, the subject is expressed in prophecy and poetry, exhortations and principles, promises and warnings. Almost every writer contributes something to the massive mosaic. Without the eternal bliss of God's elect, the Bible is not only a mystery but a mockery.

That being so, it is surprising to find how little most of the best-known secondary standards and major Christian doctrinal statements have to say on the subject. It would scarcely be an exaggeration to call heaven the Cinderella of Christian doctrine. The Apostles' Creed limits itself to two words—"life everlasting." The Athanasian Creed does the same. The Nicene Creed speaks merely of "the life of the world to come." John Calvin's monumental *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1266 pages in the Beveridge edition) has less than two pages directly devoted to the subject. The magisterial *Westminster Confession of Faith* does not even use the word "heaven" with regard to the final state of God's people, but merely states that "the righteous will go into eternal life and receive that fullness of joy and refreshing which shall come from the presence of the Lord." The 1689 *Baptist Confession of Faith*, largely based on the *Westminster Confession*, adds very little, indicating that "the righteous shall go into eternal life and receive that fullness of joy and glory with everlasting rewards, in the presence of the Lord."

John Owen has been called the greatest theologian in English history, and the sixteen volumes of his *Works* line the studies of thousands of preachers hundreds of years after their publication. Yet in over 9,000 pages I have found only 20 or so which focus directly on the subject of heaven as the eternal dwelling place of God's elect. Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology* contains more than 800 pages, yet his

presentation of the subject is contained within just one of them. This all seems passing strange, especially when the contemporary preacher Al Martin can say, "If I took a pair of scissors and clipped out every explicit or implicit reference to heaven from Genesis to Revelation I would be left with a very thin Bible."

This is the strangely anomalous background against which this article is written. After all, surely the subject of heaven should be one of consuming importance to all who give it any serious thought. As John Owen himself once put it, "Although no man living can see or find out the infinite riches of eternal glory, yet it is the duty of all to be acquainted with the nature of it in general, so that they may have fixed thoughts of it, love unto it and earnest desires after it."¹ Owen's words reflect the exhortation and example of the Apostle Paul, "Set your minds on the things above, not on the things that are on earth" (Col. 3:2); "while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:18).

The only way in which we can "look not . . . at the things which are not seen" is by using the lens of Scripture, and perhaps the best approach will be to frame our study around a series of straightforward questions of the kind that might be asked by the average Christian.

What Does the Bible Mean by the Word "Heaven"?

In the Old Testament, one word dominates the subject, but as its uses are mirrored in the New Testament we will confine ourselves to that part of Scripture.

Almost without exception, our English word "heaven" translates the masculine Greek noun *ouranos* (used in the singular and the plural) which may come from a root meaning "to lift, or elevate," and is used in the New Testament in at least five ways:

1) It is used of the sky, or what we might call the earth's atmosphere. Pointing out the folly of anxiety, Jesus directed His disciples, "Look at the birds of the air (*ouranou*)" (Matt. 6:26), while later, speaking of His own humiliation, He declared, "Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air (*ouranou*) have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (Matt. 8:20).

2) It is used of what today we would call galactic space. Perhaps the clearest use in this sense is in saying that Abraham's descendants are "as the stars of heaven in number" (Heb. 11:12).

3) It is used of Paradise, the temporary state of the spirits of believers between death and the general Resurrection. Paul seems to have this in mind when he speaks of being "caught up to the third heaven (*ouranou*)" (2 Cor. 12:2). It is impossible for us to imagine or explain his experience, but he tells us clearly that he was "caught up into Paradise" where he heard "inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak" (2 Cor. 12:4). In the light of Christ's promise to the Penitent Thief, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43), we know that souls there are in the immediate presence of their Savior.

4) It is used metonymically of God Himself, nowhere more clearly than when the Prodigal Son cries out, "I have sinned against heaven (*ouranou*)" (Luke 15:21).

5) Primarily, however, it is used of the essential and immediate dwelling place of God and the eternal home of His people. This is what Jesus had in mind when He spoke to His disciples of "your Father in heaven (*ouranois*)" (Matt. 5:16). It is what Paul had in mind when he prophesied that at the end of the present age Jesus would be "revealed from heaven (*ouranou*) with His mighty angels in flaming fire" (2 Thess. 1:7), and what Peter had in mind when pointing us forward to "new heavens (*ouranous*) and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3:13). In this sense,

our key word and its cognates occur around 250 times in the New Testament, almost exactly half of these being in Matthew and Revelation.

Where Is Heaven Located?

When Donald Coggan, Archbishop of York, was asked whether he thought he would ever land on the moon, he replied, "No, but I hope to pass it one day on my way higher." With a good evangelical pedigree, he obviously had heaven in mind—but how much higher did he anticipate going?

In December 1989, the spaceship *Galileo* reached Jupiter after a two-year journey, which propelled it 500 million miles from earth. A probe was deployed into Jupiter's atmosphere and relayed messages back to earth via the spaceship for fifty-seven seconds before being vaporized. As none of the data equated to anything the Bible tells us about heaven, does this mean that *Galileo* did not go far enough? Can we go on to assume that if *Galileo* had been programmed correctly it could eventually have reached heaven, been put into orbit around it, and landed people (only Christians would qualify!) on it.

The crudity of the questions is deliberate, and immediately tells us that, when used of heaven, words like "up" and "above" are potentially misleading, as they tend to suggest concrete, spatial connotations. When thinking of heaven, we must not allow ourselves to be limited by such concepts. In geographical terms, there is no one place in the universe in which we are nearer heaven than if we were somewhere else. Heaven both transcends and permeates space. There is no biblical basis for the hymn writer's assertion, "There's a home for little children above the bright blue sky." Nor is there biblical warrant for the charming idea that Christians will spend eternity in an exotic location somewhere in outer space.

Then how do we address the question as to the location of heaven? Strange as it may seem, a vital key to understanding what the Bible says about the location of heaven is to grasp what it says about the future state of the earth. There is more than a hint of this in the *protoevangelion* of Genesis 3:15, where man is promised that all the dire effects of sin will eventually be reversed and that there will be complete and final victory over the Evil One who had ruined the perfect environment in which man had been placed—in other words, that Paradise lost would become Paradise regained. This strongly suggests that the curse placed on this earth would be removed and that, not only would man be restored to his glorious position as the crown of God's creation, but the earth itself would be restored to its former glory.

Later, in His covenant with Abraham, God promised him and his descendants "the whole land of Canaan" as "an everlasting possession" (Gen. 17:8), but the only part of Canaan Abraham ever owned was a burial cave he bought from the Hittites. Nevertheless, the New Testament makes it clear that the covenant was not broken. "By faith he [Abraham] lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11:9-10). Abraham clearly looked forward to something more than a sliver of land in the Middle East as the eventual fulfillment of his promised inheritance. The author of Hebrews goes on to remind us that the patriarchs

died in faith without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out

they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them (Heb. 11:13-16).

It is clear from the New Testament that in the Abrahamic covenant the “inheritance” was not limited to ethnic Israelites but related to “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16), believers of all nations and of every age, and that the “land” was not restricted to Canaan, but included the whole earth. This is surely the broader picture that Paul had in mind when he assured the Galatian believers, “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Gal. 3:29).

As soon as we grasp this, we begin to make sense of some of the glorious Old Testament prophecies, such as those recorded at Isaiah 2:1-4; 11:6-9 and 65:17-19. There are those who interpret these in a millennial context, but to do so is to impoverish their meaning. One of the clearest clues as to their full meaning comes when we link “Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth” (Isa. 65:17) with “And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away” (Rev. 21:1). The phrase “heaven and earth” is the Bible’s way of describing the entire cosmos, and “a new heaven and a new earth” is best understood as the complete, unified cosmos—a heavenly earth and earthly heavens.

Re-creation or Restoration?

Although still exploring the question of heaven’s location, we need to look more closely at the idea of “a new heaven and a new earth” and to determine whether this speaks of re-creation or restoration. Those who favor the idea of re-creation (the present cosmos having first been annihilated) lean heavily on statements such as “. . . the sun will be darkened,

and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (Matt. 24:29), and the later affirmation that “looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, on account of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat!” (2 Peter 3:12). There is no denying that God’s final judgment on the cosmos will be apocalyptic and terrifying, but I want to suggest five reasons why we should favor the concept of restoration over that of re-creation.

First, in making his statement, Peter goes on to say, “But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13). Of the three Greek words translated “new” in our English Bibles, *prophatos* and *neos* relate to time or origin and *kainos* means new in nature or quality—and the word used by Peter (and by John at Rev. 21:1) is *kainos*. The picture is not of something brand new, but one which stands in continuity to what previously existed.

Second, if God were to annihilate the first cosmos and start again, it would at least suggest that Satan had ruined the first creation beyond remedy, forcing God to start again. On the other hand, restoration would show God’s complete dominion over Satan by renewing all that he had ruined. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was quite specific on the issue: “If God is to defeat Satan finally and completely, he must restore everything to its original condition.”²

Third, in the same passage, Peter speaks of the coming cataclysm in five ways:

The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare . . . everything will be destroyed in this way. . . . That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire (2 Peter 3: 10-13).

These may seem to indicate annihilation (and therefore call for re-creation) but closer study shows that this is not the case. A few verses earlier, Peter used equally strong verbs when reminding his readers of a previous cataclysm, the Noahic flood, and the survival of Noah and his family is a clear indication that the pre-flood earth was not annihilated and then replaced.

Peter was obviously drawing a parallel between the two catastrophic interventions. "Through which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water. But the present heavens and earth by His word are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men" (2 Peter 3:6-7). Noah's world was destroyed by flood. Our world will be destroyed by fire, but neither destruction speaks of annihilation. The very words Peter uses underline this. "Destroyed" (v. 6) has the same root as "destruction" (v. 7), where it is used of the eternal fate of the ungodly. This tells us that we are no more to believe in the annihilation of the universe than in the annihilation of the wicked. In the words of the sixteenth-century *Belgic Confession*: Christ will return, "burning this old world with fire and flame to cleanse it."

Fourth, when writing of the glory to come, Paul says that as Christians we "groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body" (Rom. 8:23). Yet a little earlier he says, "For the anxious longing of the creation waits," and indicates that "the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption" (Rom. 8:19,21). God has linked the destinies of creation and His highest creature. When man sinned, the whole of creation was spoiled. When God's people are redeemed, the whole of creation will be restored to its pristine perfection. Paul puts this across by personifying nature. He says it "groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now" (Rom. 8:22). Longing for the moment when it will emerge from the

eschatological trauma as a renewed creation in all its God-honoring glory. On the new earth, there will be no environmental problems, and the Second Law of Thermodynamics, dragging everything into entropy and disorder, will no longer operate. The earth's ecological perfection will exceed the wildest dreams of Greenpeace!

Fifth, the language used about the new earth is analogous to that used in Scripture of the resurrection of the bodies of believers. In a major passage on the subject Paul says,

It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body (1 Cor. 15:42-44).

The body raised in glory will be the one that was laid in the grave, yet there will be discontinuity within continuity. The new body will not be identical to the old, but it will be identifiable with it. There is no suggestion that the old body will be annihilated, nor that a new one will be created to take its place

in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality (1 Cor. 15:52-53).

Put as simply as possible, the person buried is the person raised.

There is a precise parallel between the language used here with that which the Bible uses of the new earth. In speaking of the resurrection of God's people, the Bible does not paint a picture of disembodied spirits floating around

forever somewhere in outer space. Instead, Martyn Lloyd-Jones is right to speak of “a wonderful renovation that is to take place even in the creation,” and to say that “you and I who are children of God are destined to dwell in that kind of world, under those new heavens and on this new earth.”³

This conception of the new earth brings many other Scriptures into proper focus. Two examples will serve our purpose here. God promised Abraham and his descendants an inheritance in Canaan, but when Paul refers to this, he says that the promise was that Abraham would be “heir of the world (*cosmos*)” (Rom. 4:13). The full meaning of the Old Testament promise that “the meek will inherit the land” (Ps. 37:11) is unwrapped by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount when He promises His followers that the meek “will inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5). These and many Scriptures fit perfectly into the restoration model. As Anthony Hoekema says, “Since where God dwells, there heaven is, we conclude that in the life to come heaven and earth will no longer be separated, as they are now, but will be merged. Believers will therefore continue to be in heaven as they continue to live on the new earth.”⁴

Believers banking on spending eternity somewhere on the other side of Jupiter or the Andromeda Galaxy should revise (but not lower!) their expectations.

What Is Heaven Like?

This is one of the most intriguing questions we could ask, yet we can touch on it only briefly here. Put another way, the question asks whether heaven is a “place” or a “state.”

There are instances where the Bible seems to speak of it as a “place”—such as when it is called “a city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb. 11:10). Heaven is undoubtedly “real,” but is it a “place” in the way we commonly understand that word? When we

pray, do our words flash across billions of miles of space to a concrete location? When we die, do our souls make the same gigantic journey, to be joined later by our resurrection bodies?

Some of the most concrete language used about heaven is to be found in the final section of Scripture, but the picture softens as soon as we begin to examine the words.

The heavenly city is said to be “laid out as a square, and its length is as great as the width; and he measured the city with the rod, fifteen hundred miles; its length and width and height are equal” (Rev. 21:16). Is this to be taken literally, making heaven just over half the size of Australia? On the other hand, if we take the figure twelve to look back to the twelve tribes of Israel, and 1,000 to emphasize perfection or completion, 12,000 would speak of the eternal presence in heaven of all of God’s chosen people, the new, spiritual Israel.

The measurements given indicate a cube. Again, is this to be taken literally? Surely the heavenly cube refers back to an earthly one, the holy of holies in the temple, and therefore points to heaven as being the special dwelling place of God in the midst of His people. This is certainly given special emphasis by John, not least wherein his description of the new Jerusalem he tells of a voice declaring, “the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them” (Rev. 21:3).

The walls of the heavenly city are said to be “144 cubits thick” (Rev. 21:17). In modern language this translates to 216 feet—but is this what is being said? If we take the language used to be symbolic, 144 would indicate 12 x 12, an expression of totality and a picture of God’s elect being eternally secure in communion with their God and Savior.

The city is said to be “of pure gold” (Rev. 21:18). Does this mean that if a spaceship could bring some back to earth it

would sell at around \$350 an ounce? It would seem more credible to see pure gold as a picture of inexpressible beauty and perfection, another major theme in Revelation.

Many other details are given in the same part of the Bible, but they are all best understood when taken as being symbolic and metaphorical. Heaven is certainly a “place” in the sense that it is real and substantial, but not in the sense of being a physical reality in a localized spot “out (or up) there.” We are not to think of heaven in the crassly literal terms used by the prophet Muhammad, who is said to have visited God in heaven and reported that there was a distance of three days’ journey between God’s eyebrows. Heaven is not built with material substances, nor is it localized beyond the galaxies. None of the language Scripture uses about heaven requires us to think in terms of time and space. Nevertheless, heaven is a realm of spiritual reality which transcends both.

When Does the Believer Enter Heaven?

Our instinctive response is “at the moment of death,” but this is an over-simplification. It would be better to say that the Bible speaks of the Christian entering heaven in three stages.

1) There is a sense in which for Christian believers heaven begins here on earth. Paul says God “raised us up with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:6). In a shorthand version of the same statement, he reminds one group of believers that they are “in Christ at Colosse” (Col. 1:2), in other words that they have two addresses—one on earth and one in heaven. When Christ ascended into heaven, He did not go in a private capacity, but as the Representative of all of God’s elect. In a legal sense, His ascension is their ascension—they are already seated with Him.

This is an organic unity; we can never be separated from

Him, and we have an assurance of this as we rest on His promises. It is also a dynamic unity; although we remain prone to stumble and fall, we know something of His enabling grace; we have “tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come” (Heb. 6:5). Every experience we have of Christ’s presence, love and power increases our assurance of eternal salvation. In Thomas Brooks’ words, “To have grace, and to be sure that we have grace, is glory upon the throne, it is heaven on this side of heaven.”⁵ The American hymn writer, Fanny Crosby, captured the same glorious truth in her well-known words, “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! O, what a foretaste of glory divine!” If heaven is seen as a feast (and the Bible does speak of the “marriage supper of the Lamb” [Rev. 19:9]) Christians still on earth are already enjoying the *hors d’oeuvres*!

2) Then there is a sense in which believers enter heaven at death. At the moment of death, the soul is separated from the body, which then descends to the dust. In John Flavel’s unvarnished phrase, “That body, which was fed so assiduously, cared for so anxiously, loved so passionately, is now tumbled into a pit, and left to the mercy of crawling worms.”⁶ At this point, the soul of the unbeliever goes to hades, to await final sentencing, but the soul of the believer enters immediately into the presence of its God and Savior. Paul says that “while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord,” but that we “prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:6,8). In the first phrase the verbs are in the present tense, but in the second Paul deliberately uses the aorist. There is a sense of immediacy here. No sooner has the believing soul left the body than it is in the Lord’s glorious presence. This is not heaven in its fullest expression and form, but it is “very much better” (Phil. 1:23) than anything we know on this side of the grave.

3) In its full and final sense, the believer enters heaven

after the Second Coming, the general Resurrection of the dead and the last judgment. When Jesus returns, the dead will be raised, and bodies and spirits will be reunited and reinstated as complete human beings in preparation for their appearance before the judgment seat of Christ. It is at this point that Jesus will say, "Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 25:34), and that His believing people will begin to enjoy the full experience of what the Bible means when it speaks of heaven.

The biblical doctrine of heaven is infinitely greater than Platonic notions of the immortality of the soul. There is nothing in Scripture to support the idea that believers spend eternity floating around heaven like glorified ghosts. Instead, the central emphasis in Scripture is on the resurrection of the body. This is reflected in Paul's assertion that we are "waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body" (Rom. 8:23), in other words, their final emancipation from mortality and corruption. This is one of the distinctives of Christian teaching. Man was created body and soul. He became corrupted body and soul. God's people are redeemed body and soul and will spend eternity in body and soul in His wondrous presence. As John Murray wrote, "It is in the integrity of personal life, reconstituted by the resurrection, that the saints will enter into and eternally enjoy the inheritance incorruptible, undefiled and unfading."⁷

There are therefore three "stages" in which the believer enters heaven, but they are not disjointed or unconnected. The salvation of God's people is a unitary experience. This is made clear in Romans 8, where Paul says that "neither death, nor life . . . shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39). Nothing that happens in this world ("life") can effect the divorce; neither can death, because Christ has already tri-

umphed over it. Christians enjoy the wonderful benefits which flow from what John Owen unforgettably called "the death of death in the death of Christ."

Earlier in the same chapter, Paul says of God's dealings with His people, "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son . . . and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified" (Rom. 8:29-30). All the verbs, including "glorified," are aorist. The Christian is already as good as glorified—though not yet as good as when he will be glorified!

What Will Heaven Mean to the Believer?

I have long been convinced that although the Bible does not tell us all we want to know, it does tell us all we need to know. The formula certainly holds good here, with the Scripture authors conspicuously cautious. Paul admits, "Now I know in part; but then I shall know fully" (1 Cor. 13:12), and John agrees, "It has not appeared as yet what we shall be" (1 John 3:2). Nevertheless, Scripture does enable us to draw some strands of truth together.

1) There will be perfect fulfillment of every proper human aspiration and desire. Paul speaks of the present creation being "subjected to futility" (Rom. 8:20), a phrase which carries the same kind of meaning as an Old Testament writer's admission, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (Eccl. 1:2). The picture is one of futility and emptiness, of life always falling short of what it was meant to be. In the words of Colin Wilson, one of Britain's social rebels in the 1960s, "Life is one long second best."

There will be a complete reversal of this in heaven, when creation and God's people are redeemed. Instead of the frustration of Colin Wilson's "long second best," believers will share the testimony which David voiced in prospect, "I shall

behold Thy face in righteousness; I will be satisfied with Thy likeness when I awake” (Ps. 17:15). This glorious fulfillment has been well expressed by A. A. Hodge:

Heaven, as the eternal home of the divine Man and of all the redeemed members of the human race, must necessarily be thoroughly human in its structure, conditions and activities. Its joys and its occupations must all be rational, moral, emotional, voluntary and active. There must be the exercise of all faculties, the gratification of all tastes, the development of all latent capacities, the realization of all ideals. The reason, the intellectual curiosity, the imagination, the aesthetic instincts, the holy affections, the social affinities, the inexhaustible resources of strength and power native to the human soul, must all find in heaven exercise and satisfaction.⁸

What a truly amazing picture this conjures! All needs met, all hopes realized, all hopes fulfilled, all aspirations satisfied, yet with not a hint of boredom, no dulling of satiated senses, no sapping of the spirit.

2) There will be the unending enjoyment of eternal life lived in the perfect union of a spiritual body and a purified soul. Heaven is often thought of as a place of indescribable joy, and rightly so. In the words of David’s testimony, “Thou wilt make known to me the path of life; In Thy presence is fulness of joy; In Thy right hand there are pleasures forever” (Ps. 16:11). In the parable of the talents, faithful stewards are told, “Enter into the joy of your master” (Matt. 25:21). Jude speaks of believers being presented before God’s presence “with great joy” (Jude 24). John assures believers that in heaven “there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4). That being so, we can hardly accuse Thomas Brooks of hyperbole when he writes, “If all the earth were paper, and all the

plants of the earth were pens, and all the sea were ink, and if every man, woman and child had the pen of a ready writer, yet were they not able to express the thousandth part of those joys that saints shall have in heaven.”⁹

But it is important to notice that the reason for such unimaginable and uninterrupted joy is redemptive. Our present bodies cannot enter heaven as they are, but will need to be adapted for their heavenly environment; nor can our souls enter heaven as they are—they will need to be purified. Yet the changes needed are not like those which turn a caterpillar into a butterfly, nor are they brought about by some chemical osmosis or biological metamorphosis. All who go to heaven do so as the result of the redeeming work of Christ on their behalf, a work which extends to every atom and element of their beings and personalities. The “new song” with which the glorified Lamb of God is praised in heaven includes the words, “with Your blood you purchased men for God” (Rev. 5:9 NIV), an amazing transaction which issues in radical and everlasting changes to the bodies and souls of those concerned.

Their bodies will be transformed. Paul assures the Philippians that when Christ returns, He “will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory” (Phil. 3:21). Even those bodies dissolved, scattered or buried for thousands of years will be raised and redeemed to “bear the likeness of the Man from heaven” (1 Cor. 15:49 NIV). In their heavenly home, believers will be beyond the need for food, drink, sex, sleep, cosmetics or exercise. Their bodies will no longer be subject to wear and tear, aches and pains, aging and attrition. In Alec Motyer’s words, “This transformed body will be the perfect vehicle of the new nature.”¹⁰

Their souls will be transformed. Although the dominion of sin is radically broken at regeneration the old nature remains in active conflict with the new. At death, God sov-

ereignly strikes the decisive blow which ends that conflict once and for all. At the instant of the believer's death, the soul enters immediately into the state of sinless perfection which Christ came to purchase. As Thomas Brooks put it, "A believer's dying day is his best day!"¹¹

In our present state, it is impossible for us to conceive what this means, or to imagine how it will feel. Even our holiest moments here are as spiritual sewage by comparison. The believer in heaven will be in a state of spiritual perfection. John says of the glorified Christ, "He is pure . . . in Him there is no sin . . . He is righteous"—but in the same passage dares to say that in heaven "we shall be like Him" (1 John 3:3,5,7,2). Nothing in Scripture is more staggering than this. We shall be as pure then as Christ is now, as sinless then as He is now, as righteous then as He is now. In moral terms, everything that can be said about Christ now will be true of us then. Nothing should amaze us more than the prospect of this complete divorce from sin. As Paul Helm rightly says, the believer in heaven "is so constituted or reconstituted that he cannot sin. He does not want to sin, and he does not want to want to sin."¹²

3) There will be perfect communion among all of God's people. In one of the Bible's celestial metaphors, believers are said to "enter by the gates into the city" (Rev. 22:14), a phrase which conjures up a picture of huge numbers. At any given stage of history, Christians have seemed to be in a minority, but their aggregate over the centuries is vast. Jesus promised, "Many shall come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, and Isaac and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 8:11), while in his heavenly vision John saw "a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (Rev. 7:9). The great vastness of the numbers involved obviously means that there will be great diversity, but the point

to make here is that permeating this great diversity will be complete and glorious harmony.

It is significant to notice that all biblical references to heaven are corporate. No individual believer is ever pictured as being isolated, left to his own devices, or free to pursue his own agenda. Instead, what we have is a picture of amazing multitudes of the redeemed living together in perfect unity and harmony in the ultimate answer to Christ's high priestly prayer "that they may be one" (John 17:11).

In the world to come there will be no flaws, divisions or disagreements among God's people, in contrast to life here on earth where John Flavel's words have a realistic resonance: "The best and loveliest saints have something in them which is distasteful; Even sweet briars and holy thistles have their offensive prickles."¹³ The long history of the Christian church is sadly scarred with actions and attitudes that have been a disgrace to the Gospel. Even within Christian circles, policies have been pursued and decisions taken by church leaders and members alike that have masked the most blatant dishonesty, pride and self-seeking in the Lord's name. In heaven all of that will be over and done with—forever. There will be no more personality clashes, misunderstanding, criticism, misrepresentation, maneuvering, divisions, splits and resignations. Instead, all of God's redeemed people will be united in perfect love, unity and understanding, worshipping, working, praising and reigning together without a single shadow of dissent over even the tiniest issue. There will be no more disagreement over Scripture, doctrine, church government, order or policy, worship, music or anything else. The prospect is truly amazing! Calvinists and Arminians, Primitive Methodists and Wesleyans, Presbyterians and Baptists, pre-, post- and amillennialists, Protestants and Catholics. The staunchest defenders of the *Textus Receptus* and the most enthusiastic eclectics—all will be represented there, and will live forever

in pure, perfect, permanent agreement and harmony, without a single jarring note.

4) There will be blissful rest, yet unending and joyful service.

First, there will certainly be rest. The specific promise of Scripture is that God's people "will rest from their labor" (Rev. 14:13), a theme so full of meaning that Richard Baxter's Puritan prolixity developed it to more than 450 pages in *The Saints' Everlasting Rest!* Yet what kind of "rest" will this be? It will certainly not be motionless inactivity, nor will it correspond to pagan ideas of postmortem reveling in self-satisfying luxury. There is nothing in Scripture to suggest that heaven knows anything of boredom, lethargy or laziness. Nor is there anything to endorse the sentiments expressed on this epitaph in a London cemetery: "Weep not for me, friend, though death us do sever. I'm going to do nothing forever and ever."

The biblical idea of heavenly rest goes far beyond such nonsense. Not only will it mean (as we have already seen) an end to the struggle against all the effects of physical degeneration and decay, it will also mean a permanent end to what Luther Poellot calls "the fatiguing demands of being Christian on earth."¹⁴ The word "labor" is the Greek *kopos*, suggesting that which brings weariness, discouragement, the depletion of resources, and sometimes pain and suffering. In heaven there will be final deliverance from the believer's struggle "against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, and against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12), and this overall statement can be fleshed out in many practical ways.

There will be rest from wrestling against the temptations presented by the world, the relentless undertow of the sinful nature and the spiritual forces of evil. There will be rest from the sorrow, suffering and pain of seeing the effects of

sin in the world, in our nation, among our own friends and family members, and in our own lives. There will be rest from all doubts, fears, anxieties, uncertainties and conflicts of conscience. There will be rest from persecutions, pressure, ostracism and abuse from enemies of the Gospel. There will be rest from the coldness, indifference and treachery of our own divided hearts.

Yet there is rest beyond these. There will be rest from exercising private and public means of grace. There will be no more church services, Bible study, prayer, fasting, discipline, mortification or striving after holiness. As Richard Baxter put it, "When we have obtained the haven, we have done sailing."¹⁵

Furthermore there will be rest from all our efforts to extend the kingdom of God. There will be no more sermon preparation, preaching or writing; no more visitation, tract distribution, missions, camps or seminars; no more Sunday schools or Bible classes, youth work or children's events; and (for some, best of all) no more meetings of elders, deacons or committees!

Finally, there will be no more expenditure of time, effort or resources in seeking to help in meeting the needs of the sick, the poor, the homeless or the disadvantaged.

From all of these, there will be absolute, unbroken, unending rest.

Yet there will undoubtedly be service. Writing of those who had "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb," John says that they are "before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple" (Rev. 7:14-15). Later, he makes it clear that "The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it [the city], and His bond-servants shall serve Him" (Rev. 22:3).

We have only the slightest allusions as to what that service will be. There is an enigmatic parable in Luke 19 about ruling over cities, a reference in Revelation about reigning

forever, and some extraordinary words in 1 Corinthians 6 about believers judging the world and angels (though this would hardly seem to suggest permanent employment). What is instructive is that believers' labor in heaven is never said to be *kopos*, the word used of their costly work here on earth. Instead, the verb translated "serve" is *latreuo*. Used over 100 times in the New Testament, it is intertwined with the idea of worship, a concept which fits in perfectly with John's statement, "And I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb, are its temple" (Rev. 21:22). The immediate presence of God makes the new heavens and the new earth a vast, universal sanctuary in which His people render Him wholehearted and uninterrupted service.

In the new creation, God's redeemed people will finally fulfill humanity's mandate, and all of their renewed, sanctified, expanded, perfected, undying faculties will be endlessly, joyfully poured into doing so. For the full capacity of glorified souls to be housed in our present bodies would be like fitting the Concorde's engines to a sub-compact car—the vehicle would be unable to cope with the stupendous surge of energy. In heaven, our glorified bodies will be perfectly fashioned to house such an engine and to work in perfect harmony with it. As Isaac Watts wrote:

Then shall I see, and hear and know
 All I desired or wished below;
 And every power find sweet employ
 In that eternal world of joy.

5) Best of all, believers in heaven will be at home with the Lord.

It is interesting to notice that nowhere in the New Testament are we told of Christians "going to heaven"; there is no suggestion of them making a journey through space to

a celestial location. The biblical emphasis is not on going to a place, but on going to be with a Person. Jesus promised to return to earth for His people so that "where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:3), a phrase which has been called "the most satisfying definition of heaven."¹⁶ In his great high-priestly prayer, the Savior prayed, "Father, I desire that they also, whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am, in order that they may behold My glory" (John 17:24). Paul concluded one of his eschatological summaries with the words, "And thus we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:17), and, as we saw earlier, confessed to another group of Christians, "I prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:8).

These statements all endorse the biblical position that as believers "our citizenship is in heaven" (Phil. 3:20). I have now been engaged in an itinerant ministry for thirty-five years, preaching on all five continents, in scores of countries, in hundreds of cities and towns and in thousands of buildings, but there is only one place on earth where I truly feel "this is where I belong." This is the tiny Island of Guernsey, located off the northern coast of France, and where the Register of Births records where and when I first drew breath. Yet the analogy breaks down in at least two ways. First, the longer I live, the more tenuous my links with Guernsey become. Second, every member of my family is now dead. There is no family property there; the best I can do is to stand on a street in St. Peter Port and look up to a third-floor apartment which my parents once rented.

For the Christian, heaven could not provide a greater contrast. First, the longer he lives, the closer his ties to heaven become. In Paul's words, "For now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed" (Rom. 13:11). Second, he is not going to a house, but to a home—and to one already occupied by his best friend! Jesus promised His disciples, "In My Father's house are many dwelling places" (John 14:2), the

words “dwelling places” translating the Greek *mone*. Its only other use in the New Testament is later in the same chapter where Jesus said, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and make Our *abode* with him” (John 14:23). The promise to the obedient believer here on earth is that God will come to him, love him, make his home with him. In heaven, the believer will enjoy an infinitely deeper relationship in his Father’s eternal home.

Christians rightly treasure “mountaintop experiences” in their earthly lives, but they are tantalizingly elusive and transient. Writing in his journal on April 27, 1742, David Brainerd was clearly on a spiritual high: “My soul never enjoyed so much of heaven before; it was the most refined and most spiritual season of communion with God I ever yet felt.”¹⁷ Yet we find a very different entry on January 14, 1743: “My spiritual conflicts today were unspeakably dreadful, heavier than the mountains and overflowing floods. I was deprived of all sense of God, even of the being of a God; and that was my misery.”¹⁸ If we are absolutely honest, our experiences reflect the same kind of distressing oscillations in our spiritual condition, but there will be no such changes in heaven. There, our conscious enjoyment of our God and Savior will grow far beyond the highest of our terrestrial “mountaintops”—and it will never diminish or come to an end. We will see God without distortion, praise Him without diversion, love Him without division and serve Him without distraction. In John Flavel’s words, “The spirits of just men made perfect have but one kind of employment—praising, loving and delighting in God.”¹⁹

This should be the final emphasis in this sketchy overview of the subject. Heaven is not man-centered, but God-centered. Whatever the diversity of our experiences in heaven, they will all be suffused with a sense of being intimately at home with our Father and Savior. As Bruce Milne puts it, “We may

be confident that the crowning wonder of our experience in the heavenly realm will be the endless exploration of that unutterable beauty, majesty, love, holiness, power, joy and grace which is God himself.”²⁰ Put more succinctly, we will never come to an end of exploring the wonders of our glorious God.

Let us give the last word to Anne Ross Cousin:

The bride eyes not her garment, but her dear Bridegroom’s face;

I will not gaze at glory, but on my King of grace;

Not at the crown He giveth, but on His pierced hand

The Lamb is all the glory of Immanuel’s land.

Author

John Blanchard is an evangelist and Bible teacher residing in Banstead, Surrey, England. He is a prolific author and an internationally traveled preacher. His book, *Ultimate Questions*, has sold millions of copies and introduced thousands of people to faith in Christ. He serves with the United Kingdom Trust, Christian Ministries, and has contributed several articles to previous issues of *Reformation & Revival Journal*.

Endnotes

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