

Heaven

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Scripture reading

2 Kings 2:8-18 (Elijah taken up to heaven in a whirlwind; his “cloak” fell off of him in the process.)

Major passages to know about

Keep these in mind whenever a discussion comes up about heaven. Many (probably most) crazy ideas that people theorize can be squashed with these passages.

- **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18** (“...And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive... will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. ...” [ESV])
 - For me, this is THE go-to scripture about the resurrection and Christ’s return. It shows clearly that we are going up.
- **2 Peter 3:7-13** – The earth will, in fact, be destroyed
- **1 Corinthians 15** – In the resurrection, we will be (very) different than now
- **Luke 16:19-31** – Rich man and Lazarus; this describes a place (with two separate areas) that is not earth nor heaven nor hell

What is heaven?

There are 3 ways the Bible uses the word “heaven”:

1. The sky (or the earth’s atmosphere) – it has air in it [**Genesis 1:20**]
2. Space – where stars and planets and asteroids are (no air there) [**Genesis 22:17**]
3. HEAVEN – where God dwells [**1 Kings 8:28-30**], and other spiritual beings [**Revelation 4**]
– and I think us some day

The apostle Paul says in **2 Corinthians 12:2**, “I know a man in Christ who... was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know,” (ESV).

This lesson today is about #3 – what pretty much everyone in 2023 means when they say “heaven.”

What about the “kingdom of heaven”?

Be aware: this gets very complicated quickly.

First, fun fact: this phrase is only found in the book of Matthew. Other books say “kingdom of God” or just the kingdom.

Now I am going to tell you two things that seem to be at odds.

1. The kingdom is the church – the people of God, on earth (**Colossians 1:13; Luke 17:20; Acts 1:3-8**) – and is here now (**Mark 9:1; Rev 1:6**). So don’t assume that a reference to the kingdom of heaven always means “when Jesus comes back,” because often it does not.
2. The phrase “inherit the kingdom” does seem to point to the future (even to us) when we are with God (**Matthew 25:34; 1 Corinthians 15:50-52**)
 - a. Also “enter the kingdom” seems to usually be future (**Matthew 7:21-22; Mark 9:47**)

As I looked into what the internet had to say about heaven, I found a lot of popular sites that seem to presume that “the kingdom of heaven” is the same as heaven itself. And then from there, they make very incorrect assumptions.

A popular example is **Matthew 26:29**. Jesus said, “I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.” (ESV)

- If the kingdom is the church, this scripture is now, and Christ communes with us when we partake of the Lord’s Supper
- What others hear is “This means that we will have food and bodies in heaven!”

Will we go to heaven if we obey God? (Prove it.)

Old Testament examples

My answer is yes. First, because we have examples of this happening.

We read about Elijah going up to heaven (**2 Kings 2**). And he was definitely a righteous person.

Also, Enoch did not die. **Genesis 5:24**, “And Enoch walked with God: and he *was* not; for God took him” (KJV). No, it doesn’t say “took him to heaven,” but where else would God take a man who didn’t die? **Hebrews 11:5** explains that it was because of his faith. Another interesting part is that where Genesis said God “took” Enoch, here it says “translated” (KJV). This Hebrew word (*metatithēmi*; G3346[a]) can mean “to take (up)” (see **Acts 7:15-16**) or “to change” (compare **James 4:9**).

New Testament reasoning

The idea of going to heaven is actually combining like seven or more biblical ideas. It's important to recognize this, because some points that I make later will presume, for example, that (some) details of the resurrection can be applied to heaven.

I believe that the following ideas are all one in the same:

1. Jesus Christ is coming back one day
2. He will take those who are his, which would mean good, faithful Christians
3. This will also be the end of planet earth, and judgment day
4. If we die before that day, we will be resurrected
5. We are going up
6. After that, we will be "with the Lord" and dwell with God and see his face – like, really legitimately in the same place as God and Jesus, not just figuratively or what have you
7. We will then have eternal life

Since God dwells in heaven, and since we will be with him, and since we are going up (as opposed to God coming here), therefore we will also be in heaven.

Why do I combine those together?

1 Thessalonians 4:14-17 combines 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6 (my superscripts added):

"For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus². For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord^{*}, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven¹ with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise⁴ first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air⁵, and so we shall always be with the Lord⁶." (NASB)

I dropped a * in there, too, where Paul describes "the coming of the Lord." Why?

2 Peter 3:4-11 mentions the coming of God¹ and associates it with judgment³ and destruction³:

"... 'the promise of His coming¹....' But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment³ and destruction of ungodly men. ...the coming of the day of God¹, because of which the heavens will be destroyed³...

And **Matthew 25:31-46** shows that eternal life⁷ comes after judgment³ (and Christ's return¹):

"When the Son of Man comes¹ in his glory... he will separate people one from another³ as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ...Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom ...Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, ...And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life⁷.'" (ESV)

What will heaven be like?!!!!

What Revelation says about heaven

As you probably know, Revelation is a notoriously difficult book to understand, and I personally get very confused when it talks about events that will happen.

However, there are a lot of descriptions of things: descriptions of heaven the place, and the people and beings in heaven. I think we can read and understand those descriptions without getting caught up in controversy or confusion about what future earthly events will be like, etc.

Let's go over a few key points for understanding the book of Revelation.

1. **Revelation 1:1** – The events “must soon take place” (ESV and NASB).
 - a. I suppose “soon” could be interpreted broadly to mean thousands of years, but please at least be open to the idea that much of the book might describe things that are already in the past now (though future then).
 - i. KJV has, “must shortly come to pass”
2. **Revelation 4:1-2** – Now the scenes are definitely in heaven
 - a. John was told to “come up here” to the voice from heaven
3. **Revelation 18:1-4** – Some scenes are not in heaven, though
 - a. An angel came “down from heaven” to the earth and has a message for the people
4. **Revelation 19:6-10** and **21:9-11** – scenes of the bride of “the lamb”
 - a. This is no mystery at all. The Lamb is Christ; see **Revelation 17:14** (“the Lamb will overcome them, because He is Lord of lords and King of kings” NASB). And the bride of Christ is the church; see **Ephesians 5:25, 31-32**
 - b. Has this already happened yet? Yes...? No...? Maybe both?
 - c. Exactly.

This is how the whole book is. Any chapter you open to, you can think, “Is this past or future; is it here or in heaven or both?” And almost, maybe every, time, you can see it be either way.

And I am fairly convinced that this is exactly the point.

Philippians 3:20, “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,” (NASB).

We don't live in heaven now, but somehow, we are waiting there? Why not? “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit,” **John 3:8** (ESV). God is in no way bound by time or space.

Who is in heaven with God?

- Jesus Christ
 - We just saw Jesus, “the lamb,” in heaven. Also see **Acts 1:11**
 - He is even mentioned in Revelation by name (like **Revelation 22:16, 20**)
- Seraphim (probably)
 - By this name, “seraphim” only appear in **Isaiah 6**, in a vision of “the Lord sitting upon a throne” (6:1, KJV)
 - Seraphim have six wings and shout, “Holy, holy, holy, *is* the LORD of hosts” (**Isaiah 6:2-3**, KJV)
 - **Revelation 4:8** describes four creatures with six wings each, “and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty” (KJV)
- Maybe cherubim
 - Cherubim are found where God is:
 - Guarding the garden of Eden after Adam and Eve left (**Genesis 3:24**)
 - Woven into curtains that restrict the Most Holy Place (**Exodus 26:31-33**)
 - In gold, on the top of the Ark of the Covenant (**Exodus 25:18-21**)
 - It is a common description of God that he is “enthroned *above* the cherubim” (**Psalms 99:1**, NASB)
 - And this throne above cherubim happens very literally in **Ezekiel 10:1, 19**
 - Cherubim have four wings (**Ezekiel 10:5**; compare **1:5-6**), hands (**Ezekiel 10:7**), four very different faces (**Ezekiel 10:14**), and are “living creatures” (**Ezekiel 10:15**, ESV)
 - For more of a description of Cherubim, **Ezekiel 10:20** explains that the creatures in **Ezekiel 1** were also Cherubim
 - Also here, we read, “the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God,” **Ezekiel 1:1** (ESV)
 - And the cherubim have to be *somewhere*, right? So, I think we can deduce that they are in heaven as well.
- Angels
 - There are millions of angels in heaven (**Revelation 5:11**)
 - When “angels” are described, they are like men, and never described with wings
 - “Angels” are sometimes near other heavenly beings (**Revelation 5:11, 7:11**) so there is some way in that they are different from them (wings might be one)
 - So, can you use “angels” or to describe any heavenly being? Well apparently, yes
 - **Hebrews 2:7** quotes **Psalms 8:5**, but where Hebrews says “angels” (Greek *angelos*), the Hebrew word in Psalm 8 is *elohim*, which means either “God,” “gods,” or, basically, “heavenly beings”
- People from earth (**Revelation 6:9-11**, and **7:9-17**)
- 24 Elders (**Revelation 4:4, 10**, and ten more verses). We really don’t get any hint of if these are humans or not. Regardless, they are specially set apart.
- And maybe more

What will we look like?

Well, not like we look today. The analogy given is, “Try to look at a seed and figure out what plant it will be” (assuming you don’t know already).

1 Corinthians 15:35-46 (NASB)

“But someone will say, ‘How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?’ You fool! That which you sow does not come to life unless it dies; and that which you sow, you do not sow the body which is to be, but a bare grain, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body just as He wished, and to each of the seeds a body of its own. ...So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable *body*, it is raised an imperishable *body*; ...However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual.”

Also, have you ever heard the idea that God makes our souls in heaven and then puts them into babies? Well, verse 46 would imply that that is not the case. The spiritual is not first.

Will we recognize each other in heaven?

Just because we won’t know what we will look like, that doesn’t mean that we won’t be able to recognize anything.

Honestly, I have no idea. Maybe we won’t.

In **Matthew 22:30**, Jesus says, “For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (NASB). That... doesn’t exactly clear it all up. But for sure our relationships will be different. There is a similar point made in **1 John 3:2**.

I know it’s really hard to think that we might not get to reunite with our loved ones one day. And I really don’t know what will happen. But the goal of our faith is to forever be with the Lord, and that will be worth it.

Do our relatives look down on us from heaven?

Well, sorry, but probably not.

First, Jesus is coming back to resurrect the dead in Christ. He’s not resurrecting them from heaven. They’re not there yet. Maybe they will be one day, but not yet.

Second, there’s just no evidence for anything like this in the Bible. I mean, Samuel briefly came back from the dead (if you can believe a sorceress; **1 Samuel 28**), but Samuel was in the ground (verse 13) – he didn’t come from heaven.

Will we actually be on the new earth instead?

I don't think so.

This is the cool new trend now. My ESV Study Bible really harps on this, and actually the ESV *translation* even mistranslates “in the rebirth” in **Matthew 19:28** to “in the new world,” presumably because of this idea.

The scriptures really do speak of “new heaven(s) and a new earth” (the phrases are always together). There are four such verses:

- **Isaiah 65:17** is the first mention. Also in this section, “the child shall die an hundred years old” (verse 20, KJV). I didn't think good people died – after they died. There is clearly a ton of symbolism going on here. Probably not the best passage to base a doctrine on.
- **Isaiah 66:22** is next; I don't really see much additional information here.
- **2 Peter 3:13** comes after a description of the destruction of this earth, so this has a chance anyway of the right context. Still, it's not exactly saying we will be there.
- **Revelation 21:1** begins a section that really does sound like it could back up this claim.
 - Right after this, there is “the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband,” **Revelation 21:2**, NASB)
 - That new Jerusalem bride is mentioned again in verses 9-10. We talked about this earlier – it's the church, the bride of Christ.
 - So, is this really future? Maybe. Possibly.

But while I am unsure of that, I do know this: “For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens,” **2 Corinthians 5:1** (NASB).

Also, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to *obtain* an inheritance *which is* imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you,” **1 Peter 1:3-4** (NASB).