

WHAT IS PRESENT HEAVEN LIKE?

LUKE 16:19-31

If you knew today that you were going to be immigrating to another country – let's say Australia, China or Sweden as just three examples - wouldn't you want to know everything about those countries? Wouldn't you want to find out about the people who live there, the language they spoke, the climate and the employment opportunities? One day each of us in this room will die. What then? You are going to immigrate to a country, so to speak, that is very far away. You are going to spend eternity in another world. Aren't you curious about that place? That's what this new message series I'm calling: "Heaven: A Restored Place for Redeemed People" is all about. I want to address four questions this morning and try to provide biblical answers to each one. Here's the first one:

WHAT ARE THE FOUR KINDS OF HEAVEN?

The Hebrew word for "heaven" in the Old Testament is "shamayim" and the Greek word in the New Testament is "ouranos." The word for heaven is used in four different ways in the Bible. First of all, "heaven" can refer to the literal atmosphere of our planet – the sky or the region of breathable atmosphere that blankets the earth. For example, when God flooded the world but saved Noah and all those on the ark, we read, "...and the floodgates of the heavens were opened. And rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights." (Gen 7:11–12 NIV) Second, "heaven" can refer to the physical universe – the region that includes the sun, the moon, the stars, the planets and outer space. In one of the psalms, David wrote, "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place." (Ps 8:3 NIV)

Third, "heaven" can refer to what we might call "present Heaven." Present Heaven is uniquely the dwelling place of God and His angels. Fittingly, Paul describes a vision he had with these words, "I was caught up to the third heaven fourteen years ago. Whether I was in my body or out of my body, I don't know—only God knows." (2 Cor 12:2 NLT) Why "the third heaven"? This heaven was neither the sky nor was it outer space. Present heaven is where Jesus is now. At His ascension, angels said to the disciples, "Why are you men from Galilee standing here and looking up into the sky? Jesus has been taken to heaven. But he will come back in the same way that you have seen him go." (Acts 1:11 CEV)

Where is present Heaven? Even though most of the physical universe is beyond our vision, heaven is likely in another dimension of reality altogether. If this sounds preposterous to you, please know that scientists at Yale, Princeton and Stanford among others theorize that there are at least ten unobservable dimensions and likely an infinite number of universes we can't perceive. While present Heaven is normally invisible to anyone living on Earth, human beings can sometimes be allowed to see into present Heaven. Consider Stephen, the first martyr, "But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God's right

hand. And he told them, ‘Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God’s right hand!’” (Acts 7:55-56 NLT)

Fourth, “heaven” can refer to future Heaven. I’m saying very little about this today because just about the rest of this entire message series will be about future Heaven. But, clearly, the Bible distinguishes between a present and a future Heaven. How else can you interpret these verses? “But we are looking forward to the new heavens and new earth he has promised.... Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared.” (2 Pt 3:13; Rev 21:1 NLT) So, those are the four ways the word “heaven” is used in the Bible. Now, here’s a second question:

WHAT IS PRESENT HEAVEN?

First, present heaven is God’s place. It isn’t the place God must dwell, but where He chooses to dwell. Heaven doesn’t contain God anymore than the Old Testament temple contained God, but He is in Heaven in a way that He is not in other places. Heaven is the control room for this Earth. It is God’s center of operation or His command post. The Bible says, “The LORD looks down from heaven and sees the whole human race. From his throne he observes all who live on the earth.” (Ps 33:13-14 NLT)

Second, present Heaven is likely God’s physical place. Yes, the Bible does say that God is Spirit, but it never says Heaven is non-material. Heaven is not God and God is not Heaven. God can dwell in any kind of physical or spiritual realm. The real question is whether we as human beings can exist in a place that is without physicality. There is strong biblical evidence that present Heaven is a physical place. Do you remember what Stephen saw? “But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God’s right hand. And he told them, ‘Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God’s right hand!’” (Acts 7:55-56 NLT) Jesus said, “... ‘I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you?’” (John 14:3 NLT). I recall what Jesus said to the dying thief at their crucifixion, “... ‘today you will be with me in paradise.’” (Luke 23:43 NLT) “Paradise” was a Persian word for a king’s walled or enclosed garden. Jesus could have used any word to describe present Heaven, but He deliberately chose one that suggests a physical place full of great beauty where God and His people live forever. Again, if you’re having a problem thinking of Heaven as a physical place, it may be that you’ve bought into the old Platonic lie that only spirit is good and everything material is evil.

Third, present Heaven is God’s physical, wonderful place. Take a look at Revelation 4 if you need proof Heaven is a place of absolute beauty, glory and majesty. Yes, that’s apocalyptic literature, but that doesn’t mean what’s being described is unreal or non-physical. The apostle Paul wrote, “... ‘I long to go and be with Christ, which would be far better for me.’” (Ph 1:23 NLT) How did he

know that? Because Paul had been there! Do you remember where he talked about being taken up into the third heaven? "...But I do know that I was caught up to paradise and heard things so astounding that they cannot be expressed in words, things no human is allowed to tell." (2 Cor 12:3-4 NLT)

It's also true that present Heaven is God's physical, wonderful and temporary place. Present Heaven will change. Again, the Bible says, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared.... I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, 'Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them.'" (Rev 21:1, 3 NLT) When you die, will you be with Lord forever? Yes, absolutely. Will you live in present Heaven forever? No, you won't. Present Heaven is a temporary location where followers of Jesus go when they die, but it isn't their final destination. Your ultimate and final destination is the new Heaven and the new Earth or future Heaven. Present Heaven is an intermediate, non-permanent, temporary place of great rest, joy and refreshment for all those who trust in Jesus. Some of our questions about present Heaven get answered when we see how the Bible answers another important question:

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU DIE?

Let's read a parable that Jesus told in Luke 16:19:31. I don't think Jesus' primary intent in telling this story was to give us lots of information about present Heaven. But it would be wrong to discount everything this parable suggests about Heaven and what happens when people die because it's not the main focus. After all, Jesus' parables were not figurative or symbolic stories. They were true to life stories with a spiritual message. Why would Jesus share a story that was full of mythical, fanciful information just to get a point across?

So, what can we learn from Jesus' parable as well as other scriptures? First, every person enters present Heaven or Hell immediately after death. Jesus story implies that Lazarus and the rich man immediately entered Heaven and Hell upon their deaths, respectively. Obviously, everyone's physical, dead body remains here on Earth, but your spirit enters the realm of either Heaven or Hell. The Bible also says, "...and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it." (Eccl 12:7 NLT) Once again, I think of Jesus' words to the dying thief, "... 'today you will be with me in paradise.'" (Luke 23:43 NLT) You're left with the definite impression that there's no gap between the thief's death and his entry into present Heaven.

That statement to the dying thief underlines the fact that every believer is with Jesus after death. Other scriptures underline the same truth. The Bible says, "We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord." (2 Cor 5:8 NIV) The man who wrote those words – the apostle Paul – also made this memorable statement: "... I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far." (Phil 1:23 NIV) This is why you can relax and

rejoice about your saved loved ones who have died. The Bible doesn't tell us a great deal about what they're doing now, but remember Jesus called it "Paradise." That's good enough for me! That's precisely why the Bible says to you, "And now, dear brothers and sisters, we want you to know what will happen to the believers who have died so you will not grieve like people who have no hope." (1 Th 4:13 NLT) Yes, right now there is a very painful interruption in your relationship with that parent, that spouse, that child, that family member, that close friend, but the relationship has not ended. In fact, God's Word promises a wonderful reunion, "... the Christians who have died will rise from their graves. Then, together with them, we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Then we will be with the Lord forever. So encourage each other with these words." (1 Th 4:16-18 NLT)

It's important to realize that no one is annihilated, reincarnated, experiences soul sleep or suffers purgatory according to God's Word. The idea that at death your spirit goes out of existence – annihilation – is not just absent from the Bible; it's contrary to its teaching. The idea that when you die you come back as another person or another form of life is also contrary to the Bible's teaching. Lots of people are fascinated by reincarnation but have no idea where it comes from (Hinduism) and how completely alien it is to biblical teaching. Soul sleep is the idea that after your death your spirit goes into a kind of suspended animation state for a period of time to be revived later. Scripture contradicts such an idea. Roman Catholic theology has taught the doctrine of purgatory since the fifteen century. That's the teaching that when Christians die, they aren't holy enough for Heaven yet so they must go through a period of painful and gradual purification before being allowed to enter Heaven. Yes, the Bible implies that when a Christian enters Heaven he or she is morally and spiritually pure. It doesn't teach is that this is a gradual process and that the length of time in this intermediate state is determined by your good works here on Earth. Again, Jesus said to the thief, "... today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:43 NLT)

What happens when you die? Here's a debatable but interesting assertion: every believer may receive an intermediate body. Your present physical body will not be resurrected until Jesus returns at the Second Coming. That resurrected body is the one you'll spend eternity in as you occupy the new Heavens and the new Earth. But the Bible hints at the possibility that believers in present Heaven right now may have a temporary, intermediate physical form of some kind. After all, to our knowledge, there's never been a moment when a human being has existed without a body. You aren't just a spirit who inhabits a body. You are as much physical as you are spiritual. From an earthly perspective, you can't be fully human without both a spirit and a body.

We know Jesus has a body in present Heaven. He ascended into Heaven in His resurrected body. Stephen, the first martyr, saw a physical Jesus in present Heaven. The Old Testament characters, Enoch and Elijah, were taken up into present Heaven in their bodies. No bodies were left behind in a grave. Moses

and Elijah appeared in bodies when Jesus was transfigured. Is it easier to believe they were disembodied in Heaven, then took on bodies to appear with Jesus, then became disembodied when they returned to Heaven or that they simply have temporary bodies in present Heaven? Then again, there was Paul's remarkable experience of visiting present Heaven. "I was caught up to the third heaven fourteen years ago. Whether I was in my body or out of my body, I don't know—only God knows. Yes, only God knows whether I was in my body or outside my body..." (2 Cor 12:2-3 NLT) Paul himself was unsure whether he had a body or didn't have one when he was in present Heaven. One thing is certain even if you don't have a temporary body in present Heaven, you will spend eternity in a glorified, resurrected body. The Bible says, "For we know that when this earthly tent we live in is taken down... we will have a house in heaven, an eternal body made for us by God himself and not by human hands.... For we will put on heavenly bodies; we will not be spirits without bodies." (2 Cor 5:1, 3 NLT) That now brings us to a final question we'll try to answer.

WHAT ARE THOSE IN PRESENT HEAVEN DOING?

The story about Lazarus and the rich man would lead us to believe that; first of all, people in Heaven are experiencing fully whatever it means to be with Christ. It's appropriate to assume that this is an abundant life full of comfort, joy and a rich relationship with God and others. By the same token, those in Hell are enduring misery, hopelessness and apparent isolation from God and others.

The Bible suggests that people in Heaven are the same people they were on Earth. Now, of course, they aren't exactly the same. Their earthly bodies are still here on the Earth. In present Heaven, we can safely assume that people have been morally and spiritually purified in a total way. Otherwise, how could you stand to be in the very presence of God? But Jesus' story of Lazarus and the rich man leads us to believe that after death, people are real humans with thoughts and abilities. More importantly, they retain the same identity they had here on Earth. They have memories and awareness of their lives on Earth. There is definite continuity between a person on Earth and that same person in either Heaven or Hell. If you are going to be truly yourself in Heaven, you will need to remember your life on Earth. You don't become a different person in Heaven; you stay the same person marvelously transformed and relocated. Being in Heaven will cleanse you, but it won't extinguish you or revise your history.

Jesus' story of Lazarus and the rich man implies something else about people in present Heaven. They are aware of what's happening on Earth. Do you remember the story of how King Saul employed a witch to communicate with the prophet, Samuel, who had died? Much to the witch's dismay, God actually allowed Samuel to interact with Saul. You'll recall that Samuel was very much aware of what Saul had done before and after Samuel's death. I think about what Jesus said, "In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents." (Luke 15:10 NLT) It doesn't say there that the

angels are rejoicing, but that there is joy in the presence of God's angels. Is just God rejoicing, then? Could those rejoicing also be believers already in Heaven who have experienced how wonderful it is to trust in Jesus? How else are we to think of another Bible verse that says, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us." (Heb 12:1 NLT)

Finally, from what we have observed in these and other scriptures, it's safe to say that people in present Heaven are waiting for God's ultimate triumph. They are waiting to be reunited with their saved loved ones either before the Second Coming of Jesus or when that event occurs. They are waiting for the Second Coming of Jesus when they will be reunited with their resurrected, earthly bodies and begin the next phase of eternity in renewed, glorified bodies. They are waiting for the final judgment when they will receive their heavenly rewards. This is not a judgment to determine whether they'll be in Heaven or Hell, but rather the nature and extent of their rewards in Heaven. They are waiting for the creation of the new Heavens and the new Earth. They are looking forward with anticipation for that Day when all evil, suffering and sorrow will be banished forever. In that sense, followers of Jesus here on this Earth are very much like those in present Heaven. Of both of us it can be said, "... we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good." (Titus 2:13-14 NIV)

Anthony Burger died at age 44. Many feel that he was the finest gospel pianist that ever lived. He spent ten years playing for the Gaither Vocal Band, and in 2006 accompanied the Gaithers on a Christian cruise in the Caribbean. Fifteen hundred people were on the cruise. They vacationed during the day, and they'd come to a gospel concert in the ship's theater at night. The fourth night out, Anthony Burger had just played a piano solo. About five minutes later, during the concert, he collapsed of a massive heart attack and died instantly at the piano. Everybody, especially his family, was totally distraught. Becky Pippert was a guest teacher on the cruise and she was to address the people the next morning in a Bible study. Before Becky got up to teach, a woman came to her and said, "I want to tell you what happened to me last night—just before Anthony Burger died. In the concert last night, after Anthony Burger played his solo, the spotlight went to the other side of the stage, but for some reason I kept my eyes on Anthony Burger. I felt like God was impressing these words in me: "I'm going to show you something from my realm that will be an encouragement to people." I was troubled! And suddenly, I saw standing behind Anthony Burger, an angel. He appeared to be seven feet tall, dressed in white and gold, and he just stood there for about 30 seconds. He put his hand on Anthony's shoulder, and Anthony looked up and then slumped down and died—when just minutes before, he had played the song *We Shall Behold Him*."

You may question that woman's vision of an angel. That's okay. It's not out of the Bible; it's not a test of your faith. There are some false claims out there, to be sure. But God sometimes does give us an additional glimpse of His glory and what's ahead for all of us. Here's what you must not question. The Bible says there is a Heaven and a Hell. Do not question the fact that what you do with Jesus determines your destination. Do not question the fact that those born again loved ones who have died are right now in the presence of Jesus. And do not question the fact that if you love Jesus one day you will join them.