

Answering Hard Questions About the Afterlife

Years ago, I preached an extended series of sermons on heaven. A few months after the series ended, my youngest daughter, Tina, had a very serious automobile accident and lay unconscious for several days. When she finally regained her senses in the intensive care unit of the hospital, she whispered to me, "Oh, Daddy, it's just like you described it, only far more beautiful. I felt like I had been there before, because of your preaching, but it was so wonderful I didn't want to leave it. If Jesus Himself hadn't come to me and told me that my time on Earth was not up, I would have stayed forever."

Since then, I have talked with several people who have had extensive visions of this paradise of God, and the more they told me about it, the more homesick I became for heaven. They have told me that while much of it looks like the most beautiful portions of this Earth, even more looks like nothing we have ever seen in this world. They were impressed with the complete perfection they saw everywhere and the absolute absence of withered leaves or dying vegetation. There was no sign of aging, no incident of infirmity, no unpleasantness and no unwholesome desires.

But let's not look only at personal experiences of heaven, which may be fallible. Let's look at seven things that God's book, the Bible, tells us about heaven.

1) Heaven is beauty beyond explanation. The Bible teaches us that heaven is going to be light and beauty beyond anything man can comprehend (1 Cor. 2:9). Just as the mole boring in the depths of the earth, living its entire life from birth through death beneath the surface of this planet, cannot comprehend or visualize the beauty on the surface, so we who

were born beneath heaven are equally incapable of imagining what heaven is like.

2) *In heaven, we will receive a higher level of understanding.* In his beautiful eulogy on faith, Paul declared, "For now we see as through a glass, dimly, but then, face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know, even as I also am known" (1 Cor. 13:12). Heaven will offer many answers to Earth's puzzles.

3) *Heaven is a place of service.* Revelation 7:15 says, "Therefore, they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple." There will be time for praising and worshipping God, but there will be time for service too, because service is another form of worship.

4) *Heaven is a place of endless joy.* This is consistent with Revelation 21:4 and with Christ's impartation of joy to His disciples (John 15:11).

5) *Heaven is a place of safety and security.* There is no permanence on Earth. But when we get to heaven, everything will be perpetual, and we can enjoy it to the fullest because we know that no one is going to snatch it away from us.

6) *Heaven is a place of fellowship with others.* Heaven is going to be a place of social joys (Heb. 12:22-23). We were created to be sociable creatures. Sometimes relationships can be complicated. But in heaven, interpersonal complications, misunderstandings and the like will cease to exist as we enter into harmonious relationships with others.

7) *Heaven is where we will fellowship with Christ forever.* The Word tells us that heaven is going to be a place of fellowship with Christ (1 Pet. 1:6-9). Fellowship with God is why we were created in the first place.

Will We Recognize Our Loved Ones?

Listening to a Christian telecast, I heard a guest tell of her visit to heaven some years ago. She said that although her mother had died in giving her birth, she instantly recognized her, and the mother recognized the full-grown daughter. Some years later, a relative showed her a newly discovered, tintype group picture, and she quickly picked her mother out from among the group of people, although no other photo of her mother existed. She recognized her mother because she had seen her in heaven.

Of those who have written of their visions or experiences of heaven, all have expressed an intuitive knowing of those in heaven. Many have testified that the first person they met after entering heaven was a very close loved one. Others have declared that a father or husband conducted them through the river of life. Surely death could not blot out recognition of loved ones, no matter how changed the glorified body may be, for we know one another by tone of voice, style of walk, habit patterns and ways of expression as much as by physical features.

That recognition will trigger reunion. Mothers and fathers will enjoy the thrill of having their children gathered together for a family picnic in heaven's beautiful paradise park. Lovers separated by death will find solace, comfort and pleasure in each other's arms. Children who died before maturity on Earth can proudly display their development to their mothers and fathers, while the parents rejoice that the death of the earthly body had not impeded the development of the soul and spirit of their children.

Everything that sin has snatched from us, heaven will restore to us—including our Christian loved ones. What a glorious reunion that will be! There will be so much to discuss and share and so many loved ones to look up that there might be a sense of panic if there were not such an awareness of eternity in everyone.

Though we will not know everything once we enter heaven, I believe the story of the rich man and Lazarus teaches us that our memory goes with us into eternity. But since experience, though a hard teacher, is a thorough teacher, it is inconceivable that our memories in eternity would ever let us be involved in anything that could cost us our freedom from sin's calloused control. We will have no desire for sin.

You may ask, "If in heaven I am aware and recognize saved loved ones, what about the loved ones who did not make it into heaven? Won't their absence produce sorrow and regret?"

Apparently it will not, for we are assured that there will be no sorrow there. If God chooses not to remember our sins (Jer. 31:34), then we also will be able to choose not to recall anything that would distract from the joy of heaven.

When those who have had brief visionary trips into paradise were asked if they missed certain loved ones who had rejected Christ on Earth, they have stated that they were totally unaware of their absence. It seems that God blots out the memory of those who chose not to go to heaven and accentuates the awareness of those who have entered in.

My former pastor, the late Rev. Fuchsia Pickett, illustrated this beautifully in saying that if we are seated in a well-lighted room, it is not possible for us to see out the window into the darkness, but anyone standing in that darkness can see into the room easily. When heaven's *Shekinah* (glory) illuminates all of heaven, there can be no looking out into the darkness into which the lost have been cast eternally. Perhaps they can see us (as was the case in the story Jesus told of the rich man and Lazarus), but if so, it will only increase their torment.

Our ecstasy will not be eclipsed by any sense of tragedy. God's justice in refusing admittance for the nonrepentant will satisfy every heart, for God's law, not our earthly love, will

be the prevailing attitude in heaven.

Will We Get to Meet David, Isaiah and Others?

I do not mean to project that earthly ties will continue into heaven, for marriage is only “until death do us part,” but the one factor of eternity that we have been allowed to enter into while still on earth is love. Love is not earthly but divine: “God is love” (1 John 4:8), and unlike earthly lust that will pass away with our bodies, it will abide eternally.

Whatever measure of true love we have shared with others will carry into eternity, because love is an expression of the soul, not the body. Furthermore, that love will mature and develop to a high degree of perfection when fleshly lusts, earthly fears and cultural repressions are no longer hindering forces. The divine love we will share with one another in heaven will be imparted by God and shared one with another in an unashamed, unrestricted and unlimited manner. For many of us who have had great difficulty in expressing tender feelings down here, this release would almost “be heaven” without any of the other benefits.

Not only will there be joyful reunions with loved ones, but there will also be delightful recognition of and fellowship with members of the bride of Christ who lived in a different span of time or geographical location than we did.

I once spoke from Isaiah to a large gathering of believers in Cincinnati, Ohio. After the service had ended, a sweet sister approached me to say, “Isaiah is my favorite book in the Bible. When I get to heaven, I’m going to have a long talk with Isaiah.”

“Do you think you will recognize him?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “I’ve read his writings so often I believe I’ll recognize him from the way he talks.”

She is probably right, for in listening to a reading of the Bible, it is easy to tell the difference between Peter and Paul, or Moses and Malachi.

How exciting it will be to ask Adam about the first paradise or to discuss the great flood with Noah. What pleasure will be ours as we listen to David sing his psalms to their original tunes or discuss the Song of Solomon with the author. If merely meeting an earthly author produces excitement down here, try to imagine the stimulation of talking with one of the inspired writers of Scripture.

But that will not exhaust our source of fellowship, for the saints of all ages will be there. We will meet Martin Luther, Charles Wesley, John Knox, Charles Spurgeon and hundreds of others whose lives became milestones on the pathway to heaven. We will listen to the singing of great vocalists who have stirred thousands to holiness and identify with the prayers of men and women who have moved entire communities to God from their prayer closets. We will have a chance to hear some of the great preachers of generations ago and to see how the great variances in theology have merged into one complete picture after men have fully seen that which on Earth could only be partially seen.

We will have the opportunity to thank John Bunyan for writing *The Pilgrim's Progress* while incarcerated and to thank the martyrs who victoriously died, often most painfully and ignominiously, rather than recant their faith. We will meet the pioneers and missionaries who endured such hardships to spread the gospel beyond the borders of Europe and who have made our Christian heritage possible.

Will We See Jesus Face to Face?

Yet personally, neither seeing my father, nor my eldest brother, nor the great saints of the ages hold top priority in my desire for fellowship in heaven. I long to see Jesus! It is

He who took our place, died the death that we deserved, delivered us from sin, purchased our redemption and brought us into His own residence. Although we have not seen Him, we love Him. He has become the theme of our song, the expression of our confession, the joy of our lives, the basis of our blessings and the foundation of our hope of heaven.

But despite all this, we have not really seen Him or known Him. We are acquainted with Him as our need-meeter, but we do not know Him very well as a person. We have learned much about His works and something about His ways, but few have known Him. We have embraced Him as our Savior, received Him as our guide and proclaimed Him as our Lord, but we do not yet know Him as our lover. Paul admitted, "For now we see as through a glass, dimly, but then, face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know, even as I also am known" (1 Cor. 13:12). Since most of our earthly knowledge comes to us through our senses, our capacity to receive spiritual knowledge is necessarily limited—we see in a mirror whose silver has darkened with age. But John declares that in heaven "His servants ... shall see His face" (Rev. 22:3-4) and that "we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2).

Heaven would be glorious even without this, but after seeing Him as He really is, heaven's joys will be absolutely overwhelming. Moses is the only man in the Bible who was afforded the privilege of face-to-face communication with God, but in heaven, we all shall see Him "face to face." This is the basis for our hope and the blessing of that hope—interpersonal relationship with Christ Jesus our Lord.

This will complete the circle of time, placing it into the circuit of eternity. The era of God and man walking and talking together in paradise's garden, which was lost through Adam's fall, will be restored again, and God's original purpose of creation will be realized—fellowship between creature and Creator with complete understanding, compassionate caring and companionate sharing.

We are here for a short season as preparation for the hereafter, and now we only sing about seeing Him face to face, but in heaven, we will experience it and much more. Heaven is God's home, His abode, and He will share it with me. That will be the joy of heaven.

Judson Cornwall was well-known as a pastor, teacher, author and traveling ambassador of Christ. He was a skillful communicator and learned Bible scholar. In 2005, he passed from our earthly world to the heavenly one he describes in his book *From This Life to the Next*.

A resource on this topic:

If you have difficult questions about the afterlife, get ready for some answers in Judson Cornwall's *From This Life to the Next: Everything You Want to Know About Heaven* (Charisma House). Find this book at [Amazon](#), or anywhere Christian books are sold.