

A Place Called HEAVEN

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All Scripture quotations taken from the King James Version

When the term “Heaven” is mentioned, most people have a vague idea of what is being discussed. However, they usually view Heaven as a place where people sit on fluffy clouds, sporting a halo and playing a harp, while Peter continuously greets new arrivals and the pearly gates. While this scenario makes for nice cartoons and cute pictures, it bears no resemblance to the biblical concept of Heaven.

Heaven Defined

In the Bible, when we see the word “heaven” or “heavens”, we need to understand that it is not always talking about exactly the same thing. There are several words translated as “heaven” in our English Bible.

We will first take a look at the Hebrew words for “heaven” that we find in the Old Testament. The first is the word *shawmayim* (Strong’s 8064 & 8065), which describes the visible universe, or the heavens in general. We find this word in Genesis 1:1 -- *In the beginning God created the **heaven** and the earth.* It also appears in Psalms 19:1 – *The **heavens** declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his hadywork.*

The second Hebrew word for “heaven” is *shachaq* (Strong’s 7834). This word literally means “a powder (beaten small)”, and is used by analogy to mean “a thin vapor” or to describe the firmament. In the KJV, it is translated as “skies”, “clouds”, “dust”, and “heaven”. *For who in the **heaven** can be compared unto the LORD? who among the sons of the mighty can be likened unto the LORD?* (Psalm 89:6) This word often appears in the same verse as *shawmayim*.

If you were to look in Psalms 77:18, you would see the word “heaven” appear again, translated from an entirely different word, *galgal* (Strong’s 1534), a word which is usually translated as “wheel” and describes “rolling things” or whirlwinds.

Before we leave the Old Testament, I would like to point out what Solomon said in his temple dedication prayer in I Kings 8:27 -- *But will God indeed dwell on the earth? behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded?* The words “heaven” and “heavens” are the word *shawmayim*. Solomon’s point here is that God is so much greater than anything we could know. Solomon built Him a Temple, but God didn’t need a temple. He is greater than any man-made structure. In fact, He is greater than the universe itself.

Moving to the New Testament, we find three Greek words that are translated as “heaven”. The first of these is the word *ouranos* (Strong’s 3772), which means “the sky”, and is used when generally referring to the sky or all the heavens. We will find that it is a base word for the other two Greek words that we will study. Most of the time you see the word “heaven” or “heavens” in the English New Testament, it is translated from this word. *Ouranos* is translated as “air” in Matthew 8:20 - *And Jesus saith unto him, The foxes have holes, and the birds of the **air** have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head.* It also appears in Matthew 5:34 - *But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by **heaven**; for it is God's throne.*

The next word we find is *mesouranema* (Strong’s 3321), which is a compound of the words *ouranos* (see above) and *mesos* (Strong’s 3319), which means “middle”. Obviously, this word can

be defined as “mid-heavens”. This word only appears three times in the Bible – in Revelation 8:13; 14:6 and 19:17. Each time it is referring either to angels or birds flying “in the midst of heaven”.

The third word is *epouranios* (Strong’s 2032), which is a compound of *ouranos* and *epi* (Strong’s 1909), which means “over” or “above”. This word can be defined as “above the sky” or “celestial”. It is often translated in the KJV as “heavenly”. Just a few of the places you can find this word are Ephesians 1:20, Philippians 2:10, and Hebrews 12:22.

Epouranios is the best Greek word we have to describe the abode of God. Somewhere out beyond what we can see is a place where Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father.

The Apostle Paul mentioned that he knew a man that was caught up to the “third heaven” (heaven = *ouranos*), a man we believe to be Paul himself. *I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven (2 Corinthians 12:2).*

Paul’s testimony indicates that Paul made a distinction between three different heavens, which do not necessarily coincide with the three Greek words we discussed. The first heaven would be the firmament of the earth, the air we breathe. The second heaven would be the home of the stars and planets, while the third heaven would be above all these – the place where God abides – a place we don’t know a whole lot about yet. This would also be the place Jesus talked about in John 14:2 – *In my Father’s house are many mansions...* This is the location of the throne of God – a throne that Isaiah was able to see in a vision, which he recorded in Isaiah chapter 6.

The “third heaven” is also the location of believers who have died. In the Old Testament, those who lived by faith were transported to Paradise. When Jesus died, He brought them out of Paradise and into the presence of the Father.

Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things. (Ephesians 4:8-10)

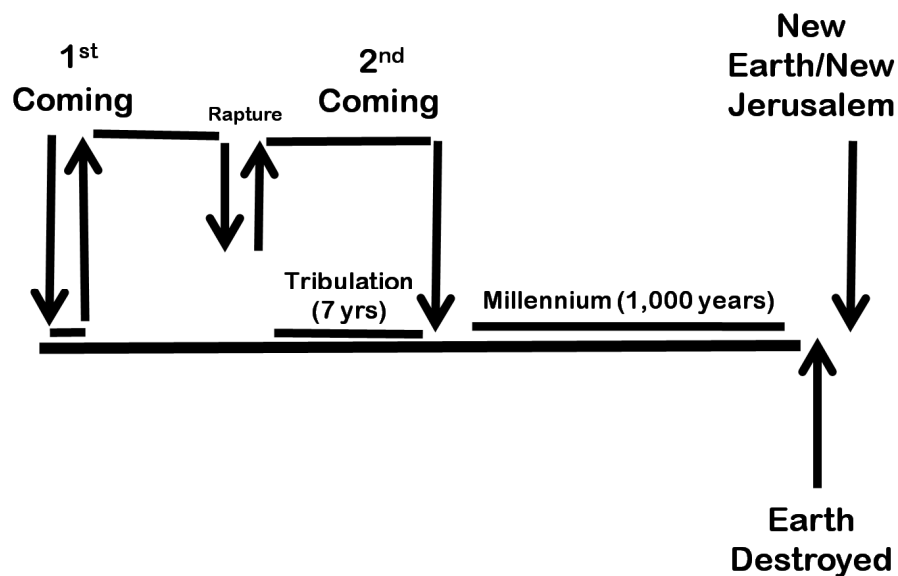
Now, every believer in Jesus Christ who dies is also immediately ushered into the presence of God.

Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord: (For we walk by faith, not by sight:) We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord. (II Corinthians 5:6-8)

Though these departed believers are in the presence of the Lord, they are not settled into their eternal home quite yet. They still do not have bodies – they are decaying somewhere on the earth. It would be impossible for any of us corruptible human beings to get to the third heaven without a great change taking place. Corruption cannot inherit incorruption. The greatest technology we have today cannot get us there, but Jesus, in His risen body, was able to physically ascend into the clouds all the way to the presence of God, with the disciples standing there with their mouths gaping open.

Heaven Delivered

If the dead in Christ are not yet in their eternal home, where is it? What is it? To help us understand the truth of Heaven, we need to understand the timeline of prophecy. Jesus is one day going to come in the clouds in what we call the “Rapture”. The bodies of those who are with God already will be raised, made incorruptible, and reunited with their souls. Immediately after this, the bodies of the living saved will be changed into incorruptible bodies, and they will go to be with God for a period of about seven years. After this terrible time of tribulation is past, Jesus is going to return physically to the Mount of Olives, causing it to split wide open (read about this in Acts 1:11 and Zechariah 14:4). The Battle of Armageddon will take place, when Jesus will drive the enemies out of Jerusalem, bind Satan for 1,000 years, and throw the beast and false prophet into the lake of fire (Revelation 19:11-20:3). Following this will be a 1,000 year peaceful reign of Christ on the earth. After that, Satan will be set loose, he will gather all the nations of the world against Jerusalem, and God will destroy him and the armies, sending Satan to the lake of fire (Revelation 20:7-10).



This is when things get really exciting. Beginning in Revelation 21:1, we can start reading about a new heaven and a new earth. The old one is gone, and a new one has come. See what Peter has to say about it:

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness. (II Peter 3:10-13)

This earth as we know it will be destroyed. The sin curse will be gone. We will be living in a new city, on a new earth, with new heavens. God will give us the chance to start over.

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. (Revelation 21:1-2)

A woman is said to be the prettiest on her wedding day – when she is “adorned for her husband”. That is the beauty of the New Jerusalem – she is perfect in every way.

Heaven Described

The New Earth is actually what we are describing when we speak of “going to Heaven”. Some believe the old earth will be totally destroyed, and some believe it will be purified by fire. Whether the first one is annihilated or melted, the new earth that is formed will have no more curse. God Himself will move His dwelling place to this new earth. All the tears, sorrow, pain, and death are gone forever from those who have trusted Christ.

And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful. (Revelation 21:3-5)

The capitol of this new earth will be a beautiful city called the “New Jerusalem”. The old Jerusalem was the capitol of the Jews and has been destroyed and rebuilt several times. Currently the Muslims are in a fight with the Jews over who owns the city and the site where Solomon’s temple used to stand. In the New Jerusalem, no wars will be fought. I can’t even begin to imagine the beauty and peace of this city, much less try to describe it. So, I will let the Bible do the speaking.

And there came unto me one of the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven last plagues, and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife. And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, Having the glory of God: and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal; And had a wall great and high, and had twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and names written thereon, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel: On the east three gates; on the north three gates; on the south three gates; and on the west three gates.

And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. And he that talked with me had a golden reed to measure the city, and the gates thereof, and the wall thereof. And the city lieth foursquare, and the length is as large as the breadth: and he measured the city with the reed, twelve thousand furlongs. The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal. And he measured the wall thereof, an hundred and forty and four cubits, according to the measure of a man, that is, of the angel. And the building of the wall of it was of jasper: and the city was pure gold, like unto clear glass. (Revelation 21:9-18)

This is going to be one huge city. It is a cube, being 12,000 furlongs in each direction. This translates to almost 1,400 miles long, side, and high. That is approximately the distance between Chicago, Illinois, and Miami, Florida. The city will be surrounded by a wall of jasper that stands about 216 feet high.

And the foundations of the wall of the city were garnished with all manner of precious stones. The first foundation was jasper; the second, sapphire; the third, a chalcedony; the fourth, an emerald; the fifth, sardonyx; the sixth, sardius; the seventh, chrysolite; the eighth, beryl; the ninth, a topaz; the tenth, a chrysoprasus; the eleventh, a jacinth; the twelfth, an amethyst. And the twelve gates were twelve pearls; every several gate was of one pearl: and the street of the city was pure gold, as it were transparent glass. (Revelation 21:19-21)

We hear a lot of talk about “the pearly gates”. This is a misnomer – the gates will not be “pearly”, but solid pearl - one huge pearl per gate. Only God can come up with such a pearl.

And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it. And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof. And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it. And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there. and they shall bring the glory and honour of the nations into it. And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life.

And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him: And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads. And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever. (Revelation 21:22 -22:5)

Along the banks of the “river of the water of life” will grow “the tree of life”. These trees are most likely similar to the tree that caused Adam and Eve to be banished from the Garden of Eden. God knew that if they ate from that tree, they would live (Genesis 3:22).

How could anyone with even a simple understanding of this city not want to be there? Unfortunately, there are many people who will never get to take part in eternal life in this beautiful new earth and city. I would like to call attention again to Jesus’ words in John 14:6 – *I am the way, the truth and the life. No man cometh unto the Father, but by me.* The perfect life on a perfect earth for eternity is only for those who put their faith in Jesus Christ. Admittance is free because of the

price Jesus paid. All you have to do is receive it. Then the promise of eternal life in this beautiful new city will be yours. Additionally, *God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away* (Revelation 21:4).