

Will You Go to Heaven?

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Heaven ! This one short word summarizes the blessed goal of all Christians. It gives the very meaning of the purpose of life, and the essence of the hope of life after death.

Or does it?

Millions of professing Christians think so. But are they correct? Is heaven what they think it is – namely, the prayed-for and worked-toward reward of the saved?

You need to know the truth! And even if you already know the truth, you need to be able to prove it. Probably no doctrinal question strikes closer to the heart of traditional Christian belief than the truth of the biblical teaching on the doctrine of heaven.

The basic doctrine

Quite surprisingly, the biblical teachings about heaven can be easily summarized in a brief sentence or two: In short, heaven is the celestial place of God’s throne, His headquarters of government of all things seen and unseen (Psalm 11:4). It is decidedly *not* the promised reward of saved Christians, however.

The usual teachings of this world

No doubt that last sentence – the one saying that heaven is *not* the promised reward of the saved – would shock most professing Christians. Most have been taught, and have blindly accepted without proof, that heaven is indeed the goal and hope of life itself. Most persons, even though not having seen heaven, carry with themselves a mental image of it. Usually this image is of a sort of spiritual paradise, replete with adorning clouds populated by angels (with wings, halos and long, flowing golden hair). Also to be found are the “souls” of the faithful, clustered together in holy groups, playing on harps or “beholding the face of the Lord” in trancelike fixation millennia after millennia.

Yes, this is probably most people’s belief about heaven – what it is for, and what it is like. But it is not the picture the Bible gives!

The Bible teaching

In the case of the doctrine of heaven, it is best to first show what heaven *is*, and then what it is *not*.

Many are surprised to find that the Bible speaks of not just one but three heavens.

The *first* heaven is our earthly atmosphere – the blanket of life-sustaining gases that encircles our globe, the heaven where the birds fly (Gen. 1:20) and from where the dew falls (Deut. 33:28).

The *second* heaven represents the expanse of this great universe – the outer space where we find the sun, moon, stars, comets and planets. It is of this heaven that God spoke when He said that the sun, moon, and stars were to be for lights (Gen. 1:15-17).

The *final* or *third* heaven (2 Cor. 12:2), is indeed the location of God’s holy throne and the seat of all the ruling authority of all physical and spiritual reality. And it certainly does have *some* of the qualities traditional Christianity assigns to it.

For example, the third heaven is a type of spiritual paradise. The apostle Paul said as much in 2 Corinthians 12:4 when he briefly described the place and called it “Paradise.”

Further, it is plainly the seat of God’s throne and of His power, for we are taught by Jesus Christ not to swear by heaven, because “it is God’s throne” (Matt. 5:34).

God further draws back the curtain and reveals more about His throne in Revelation 4, where, in a few sweeping verses the apostle John gives us some panoramic glimpses of the celestial pageantry and power of the heavenly throne room.

Of the specific layout and furnishing of the place we know little. However, in addition to the items listed in Revelation 4, we are told that the lampstand, table, showbread and other artifacts of the earthly tabernacle were merely physical counterparts of heavenly things (Heb. 9:1-5, 23), although an exact explanation of what this means is not given.

But we need not guess about whether heaven is the reward of the saved. We are clearly told, in no uncertain or ambiguous terms. And the answer will shock many!

Jesus plainly taught, “No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man” (Jesus Himself – John 3:13). That’s right, that scripture means just what it says: No man – not Abraham, Isaac or Jacob – no one – has gone to heaven! There are no souls of the saved in heaven. It cannot therefore be the reward of the saved.

People do not like to believe this plain statement of Jesus. Yet even King David, said to be a man after God’s own heart (Acts 13:22) and one who found favor with God (Acts 7:46), was not in heaven even after Jesus’ death. As the apostle Peter said, “Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day” (Acts 2:29). Peter then added, “For David did not ascend into the heavens” (verse 34).

We have now seen that heaven *is* God’s throne, and we have read that it most assuredly is *not* the abode of the deceased souls of the righteous. But then, what *is* the future hope and goal of the true Christian?

Put briefly, the hope and goal of a Christian is not to enter heaven and play a harp for eternity, but to be born into the Family of God (as a member of the God family and hence become a literal spirit-born son of God) and rule in God's government and Kingdom with eternal life *from on the earth*. See Revelation 5:10; Daniel 2:44; 7:27 and Matthew 5:5.

Yet, even the plain scriptures cited above, showing that heaven is not the abode of the righteous dead nor the promised reward of the saved, are sadly ever sufficient to answer the objections of those who believe that Jesus promised heaven to the faithful who die. Rather, they point to numerous scriptures that, to their minds at least, seem to say we do go to heaven at death.

For example, some will point to John 14:1-4, which quotes Jesus telling the disciples that in His "Father's house are many mansions" that He was going to prepare for them, and say this passage proves we go to heaven.

But these verses say no such thing. For the Father's "house" is not heaven, but the Temple of God (John 2:16), which had many chambers or "mansions," each for the use of a specific job or function. The disciples correctly understood Jesus to be saying that in His Kingdom were many responsible positions, and that He was going to prepare a specific job for each of them, and that He would bring it with Him when He comes again (John 14:3; Rev. 22:12) to set up His Kingdom on earth.

Others turn to Philippians 1:23-24 and quote Paul's statement that he desired to "depart and be with Christ" as a proof text for going to heaven at death. But Paul does not say in this verse where he will meet Jesus Christ, nor when. Paul does in other verses clearly show that he and the rest of the righteous will meet Jesus at the time of the resurrection, and on earth in its "clouds," at His Second Coming (1 Thess. 4:16-17), not in heaven.

Consider also that Martha, sister of Lazarus, understood that the dead will rise at the resurrection of the dead, for she said to Jesus, "I know that he [Lazarus] will rise again in the resurrection at the last day" (John 11:24); so, she clearly understood that the dead do not "go to heaven."

And consider this: If the saved souls of millions are now in heaven, why must there be a resurrection of the dead in the first place (1 Cor. 15)? Obviously, because the dead are just that – dead and in their graves, not in heaven. Psalm 146 reveals that when a person dies, "in that very day his thoughts perish" (verse 4). Death is described as going to sleep but with no consciousness (1 Kings 2:10; 2 Chron 9:31).

Likewise, the oft-quoted scripture saying, "great is your reward in heaven" (Matt. 5:12) is misunderstood by many. Too often verse 5 of that chapter is not read, where Jesus says the righteous will "inherit the earth." Nor is this section compared with 1 Peter 1:3-4, which says a Christian's reward is "reserved in heaven," and Revelation 22:12, which shows that – although the *reward* is reserved in heaven – Jesus will bring it with Him and give it to us when He returns to earth.

Space fails us to address in detail other misunderstood passages of Scripture such as those concerning the true fate of Enoch and Elijah, whom many falsely suppose went to heaven based upon misunderstood verses, or the story of the thief on the cross, Lazarus and the rich man and Paul's vision of heaven in 2 Corinthians 12:1-6.

Key verses

Aside from a knowledge of the oft-misunderstood verses just mentioned, the whole subject of heaven can be grasped by keeping in mind certain scriptures. The main ones are Matthew 5:34, which says heaven is God's throne; Revelation 4, which describes that throne; John 3:13, which states no man has ascended to heaven; and Acts 2:29-35, which states that – even after Jesus Christ's ascension – David the righteous had not gone to heaven.

Also, it is important to remember several key verses showing that God's Kingdom will be **on earth** (Matt. 5:5; Dan. 2:44; 7:27; Rev. 5:10).

Yes, the biblical truth about heaven is easily summarized: Heaven is God's throne and current seat of government, but it is *not* the promised reward of the saved. How wonderful is our God to reveal His precious plan and purpose for mankind that will come to fruition in this end age!