

## **What Do Christians Believe About Heaven? Is Heaven For Real?**

Revelation 21 and 22

First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte NC

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July 13, 2014

Then I saw a new heaven and new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

They will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them;

He will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

Mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

For the first things have passed away.”

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.”

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day – and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

What is heaven?

Four-year-old Colton Burpo told his story to his parents who wrote a book about it. Colton was very sick from appendicitis when he had an experience of God’s presence. Colton’s story, called *Heaven is for Real* has been on the New York Times Bestseller list for a few years now. In April, it was made into a movie.

What is heaven?

A neurosurgeon named Eben Alexander had a near death experience when he was 54 years old. Up to that point his world had been defined by the things he could explain. There was no room for mystery; no room for spirituality. But when he lay on a hospital bed for seven days while in a coma, Dr. Alexander had an experience unlike any other. He describes as a feeling of warmth – an environment that he likened to being a fetus in a womb. There, he encountered God – whose presence emanated love and understanding beyond the realm of Dr. Alexander’s understanding. After recovering from his coma, Dr. Alexander wrote a book to tell his story. *Proof of Heaven* has also been on the New York Times Bestseller list for a couple of years.

What is heaven?

Colton Burpo and Eben Alexander probably have a better answer than any of us would have because they have been closer to death than most of us have been. Heaven is hard for us to describe or understand or even conceive because it is not something we have experienced. There is a lot about our faith that we have experienced. We have all experienced grace. We have all experienced sin. We have all experienced God’s providential care. If we have been present at the birth of a baby, we have experienced creation. But none of us have experienced heaven. Some – like Colton Burpo and Eben Alexander believe they have come close, but there are no definitive accounts available to us of what heaven is like. Which is why, I suspect, books like *Heaven is for Real* and *Proof of Heaven* are sure-fire bestsellers: we want to know what we cannot know.

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I don’t know why, but the first time I imagined what heaven was like I pictured a long, long hallway with an endless supply of doors that led to a great room that was filled with light. How is that for a concrete imagination? Maybe I had read the verse from John 14 – “In my father’s house there are many rooms” – and had just taken it literally? Sounds kind of boring to me now...I sure hope that heaven looks a lot different than a big Motel 6!

What is heaven?

What do you think? What do you believe?

It has been my experience that there are some common things that we all want to believe about heaven.

We want to believe that heaven is a place – or a state of being – where we are fully in God’s presence. Where, instead of seeing in a mirror dimly, we will see God face to face.

We want to believe that heaven is a place – or a state of being – where there is glad reunion with all the people we have loved before. A place where those we lose to death are – and a place where we know that, one day, we will be.

We want to believe that in heaven, we are free from those things that have hindered us: our sins, our inadequacies, our poor choices, our station in life.

I want to tell you that I not only think it is appropriate for us to believe these things about heaven – but they are what I believe. And yet, this is not the whole story.

One of the reasons it is so hard for us to come up with language or concepts to describe heaven is because we have a limited capacity for understanding. Imagine what it would be like if you didn't know what "colors" were. Now imagine how you would describe a rainbow. These are the kind of limitations we face as we attempt to understand what life beyond this life is like.

CS Lewis once said that "heaven is that remote music that we are born remembering." I think one of the reasons that we are so curious about what heaven is like is not because we are anxious about death, but because from the earliest moments of our lives, we are yearning to remember what it feels like to be at one with our Creator.

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You may have noticed that so far in this sermon I have not mentioned the Bible. Many – perhaps even, most – of the ways that we conceive of heaven are shaped by things outside of the Bible. And, as would be natural, most of our questions about heaven are motivated by the personal...about what heaven means for us and for our loved ones.

To be sure, the Bible – almost exclusively the New Testament – makes mention of eternal life.

You know this from John's gospel: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.*

The Apostle Paul writes: *for this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure...for we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.*

The Bible – and Paul, especially, discusses what happens to our bodies when we die. *Nothing...in life or in death...will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.*

When Jesus was being crucified, he said to the criminal beside him on the cross:

*Today you will be with me in paradise.*

What scripture teaches us is that those who have died are in God's presence. They are gathered together in a great cloud of witnesses – witnesses that cheer us on to run our race with perseverance. And when the day comes when we will die, we will be – with them – in God's presence.

But that is not the whole story.

Because when it comes to heaven, what the Bible is mainly focused on is not what it will be like for individual members of the faithful, but what it heaven will be like for all of God's creation.

We often think of heaven as that place which offers the ultimate escape from the problems of the world. Heaven is sometimes thought to be a return to the Garden of Eden; a return to the world the way it used to be before human beings came along and ruined it with our prideful living.

We think of heaven as a place where we go to be with God so that we can get away from the difficulty of human struggle; a place where we can reside with God and God alone.

But this is not the Bible's vision of heaven. In our scripture for today – from John's Revelation – the new heaven and new earth is expressed – not in an isolated, far-removed, ethereal place – but in a *city*.

Did you catch that? A city.

John describes that city, the New Jerusalem, as the place where God's ultimate vision for the world takes shape. In our scripture we find that it is not God's plan to scrap what was and start over. When it comes to heaven, God's vision, God's hope, is to *complete* creation.

New Testament scholar Eugene Borning notices, the one seated on the throne does not say "I will make all new things," rather, he says, "I will make all things new."<sup>1</sup> God picks up the pieces of our reality; God takes what is so hard for us to do – to live together in human community – and shapes the world into a holy city.

God's vision of heaven is a city whose gates are never closed because there is nothing to fear. God's vision of heaven is a city where there is no temple because there is no longer a separation of the holy from the unholy. In God's of heaven, the city has no need of sun or moon because its light comes from the lamp of the Lamb. Nations, rulers, and all people bring the best of themselves – to God and to one another.

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<sup>1</sup> Borning, Eugene, *Revelation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989) p. 220.

Justice, wholeness, and peace – these are the marks of God’s holy city.  
No more will the world be defined by inequality, by greed, or by violence.

And to create such a city – God will fashion what *already exists in our world* into a perfected vision.

I recognize the fact that sometimes we can look at the world around us and wonder how it could possibly reflect God’s goodness. It is easy to see how quickly we can imagine heaven to be a much needed escape. In our own city, we have been visited by senseless violence. We see evidence of inequality and wonder how it will ever change. We are aware that the important issues of our time increasingly divide us into camps and sides that do little to bring progress and much to hinder growth. I know there is temptation to lose hope.

But hope is the essence of the Christian faith. And in the end, ours is a faith that does not give in to cynicism; it does not submit to despair.

Our faith calls us to something better.  
The reality of heaven calls us to something better!

At its biblical root – heaven is not an escape, or a reward, it is a promise.

Because of heaven, we know how the story ends – it ends with God and it ends in redemption...with completion. Right now, even today, we are a part of the creation that God will transform into the new heaven and the new earth.

In this knowledge, we are called – not to sit idly by and wait for our rescue or God’s redemption – but to invest ourselves in the world and in this city. We are called – not to despair the state of things – but keep our eyes open for the evidence of God’s kingdom.

We believe – sometimes against all evidence to the contrary – that Jesus is Lord. We believe that God is in control. We believe that love reigns supreme.

So away with fear.  
Away with cynicism and despair.  
Away with feeling that the best days are behind.

We are called to live in anticipation of God’s new heaven and new earth.  
We are called to live into hope.

Amen.