

ENGAGE

This week is more of a topical study on heaven. The sermon will look at Luke 16, but the bible study needs to address many verses to accomplish the goal of a better understanding of heaven. Below is a list of frequently asked questions about heaven. Please use the questions for initial conversation and then look at the scriptures and bring the biblical answer.

EXAMINE HEAVEN

In the Bible, as in the English language, 'heaven' can refer to the region of the atmosphere or also to a supernatural world. Birds fly in the heavens (Jer. 4: 25, REB, AV, NJB), and the clouds are there (Prov. 8: 27–8). 'Heaven' also refers to the firmament or celestial vault (Gen. 1: 6) which divides the waters above from those beneath and is supported on pillars (Job 26: 11). The waters above supply rain which drops to the earth through openings in heaven (Gen. 7: 11). Stars are attached to or suspended from heaven (Job 22: 12). In visions of the End, the heavens will be destroyed along with the earth (Isa. 24: 4; Luke 21: 33).

The supernatural 'heaven' is the dwelling place of God, but the word is often written in the plural, as Ps. 148: 4: 'the heaven of heavens'. The Hebrews spoke of the existence of several heavens, and Paul had a mystical experience of being taken up 'into the third heaven' (2 Cor. 12: 1 ff.). Christ ascended above 'all the heavens' (Eph. 4: 10). The book of Enoch refers to 'seven heavens.'

God's throne is in heaven (Isa. 66: 1), and angels surround it (1 Kgs. 22: 19), and this vision is developed in Rev. 4. In the highest heaven there is a 'tabernacle' or 'true tent' (Heb. 8: 2) 'exalted above the heavens' (Heb. 7: 26) where Christ the true High Priest offers spiritual sacrifices and intercedes for faithful Christians. Similarly, this is where the Son of Man will sit at the right hand of the Father (Mark 14: 62) and will prepare places there for disciples (John 14: 2). The names of the redeemed are recorded in heaven (Heb. 12: 23), which is a realm of joy (Luke 15: 7) and peace (Luke 19: 38). The descriptions of heaven in Rev. 4, 14, and 21, representing the ultimate triumph of God, have often provided the ground of hope for life after death and have been a fertile source of imagery in Christian hymns. The essence of the belief is that heaven is the promised fulfilment of a life already begun but incomplete; it is not a continuation in another space and time of the kind of life experienced here and now on earth but a translation into a new dimension.

As believers, I imagine our first glimpse of heaven will cause us to gasp—with amazement and delight. That first gasp will likely be followed by many more as we continually encounter new sights in that endlessly wonderful place. Though most of us are in no hurry to get to our final destination, we all have questions about it. After in-depth study of the Scriptures, here are some of the most frequently asked questions.

1. Will we miss our old lives?

Have you ever bought an economy ticket for a flight, but because of overbooking, been upgraded to first class? Did you regret the upgrade? Did you spend your time wondering, What am I missing by not being in the back of the plane?

The upgrade from Earth to heaven will be vastly superior to that from economy to first class. If we would miss something from our old lives, it would be available to us in heaven. Why? Because we will experience all God intends for us. He fashions us to want precisely what He will give us so what He gives us will be exactly what we want.

2. Will we become angels?

I'm often asked if people, particularly children, become angels when they die. The answer is no.

Death is a relocation of the same person from one place to another. The place changes, but the person remains the same. The same person who becomes absent from his or her body becomes present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8). We won't be angels, but we'll be with them.

3. Will we still be tempted?

Once I was asked if we will ever be tempted to turn our backs on Christ. The answer is no. What would tempt us? Innocence is the absence of something (sin), while righteousness is the presence of something (God's holiness). God will never withdraw His holiness from us; therefore, in heaven we cannot sin. We'll never forget the ugliness of sin, however. Having known death and life, we who experience life will never want to go back to death. We'll never be deceived into thinking God is withholding something good from us or that sin is in our best interests.

We'll always know sin's costs. Every time we see the scarred hands of Jesus, we'll remember. We'll see sin as God does. It will be stripped of its illusions and will be utterly unappealing.

4. Will we have work to do?

The idea of working in heaven is foreign to many people. Yet Scripture clearly teaches it. When God created Adam, he "took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (Genesis 2:15). Work was part of the original Eden. It was part of a perfect human life.

God Himself is a worker. He didn't create the world and then retire. Jesus said, "My Father is always at His work to this very day, and I, too, am working" (John 5:17). Jesus found great satisfaction in His work. "'My food,' Jesus said, 'is to do the will of Him who sent me and to finish His work'" (John 4:34).

We'll also have work to do, satisfying and enriching work that we can't wait to get back to, work that'll never be drudgery. God is the primary worker, and as His image-bearers, we're made to work. We create, accomplish, set goals and fulfill them—to God's glory.

5. Will we still experience emotions?

In Scripture, God is said to enjoy, love, laugh, take delight and rejoice, as well as be angry, happy, jealous and glad. To be like God means to have and express emotions. Hence, we should expect that in heaven emotions will exist for God's glory and our good.

We know that people in heaven have lots of feelings—all good ones. We're told of banquets, feasts and singing. People will laugh there (Luke 6:21). Will we cry in heaven? The Bible says, "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning or crying or pain" (Revelation 21:4). These are the tears of suffering over sin and death, the tears of oppressed people, the cries of the poor, the widow, the orphaned, the unborn and the persecuted. Such crying will be no more.

We might, though, shed tears of joy. Can you imagine joy flooding your eyes as you meet Christ, for example, and as you're reunited with loved ones? I can.

6. Will we know everything?

God alone is omniscient. When we die, we'll see things far more clearly, and we'll know much more than we know now. But we'll never know everything.

In heaven we'll be flawless, but not knowing everything isn't a flaw. It's part of being finite. Righteous angels don't know everything, and they long to know more (1 Peter 1:12). They're flawless but finite. We should expect to long for greater knowledge, as angels do. And we'll spend eternity gaining the greater knowledge we'll seek.

7. Will we recognize one another?

Scripture gives no indication of a memory wipe causing us not to recognize family and friends. Paul anticipated being with the Thessalonians in heaven, and it never occurred to him he wouldn't know them. In fact, if we wouldn't know our loved ones, the comfort of an afterlife reunion, taught in 1 Thessalonians 4:14-18, would be no comfort at all. In heaven we probably won't fail to recognize an acquaintance in a crowd or forget people's names.

8. What will we do to avoid boredom?

People sometimes say, "I'd rather be having a good time in hell than be bored in heaven." Note the assumption: sin is exciting and righteousness is boring.

Believing in this assumption means you've fallen for the devil's lie. In reality, sin robs us of fulfillment. Sin doesn't make life interesting; it makes life empty. When there's fulfillment, when there's beauty, when we see God as He truly is—an endless reservoir of fascination—boredom becomes impossible. In heaven we'll be filled—as Psalm 16:11 describes it—with joy and eternal pleasures.

9. If our loved ones are in hell, won't that spoil heaven?

In heaven we'll see clearly that God revealed Himself to each person and that He gave opportunity for each heart or conscience to seek and respond to Him (Romans 1:18-2:16). Everyone deserves hell; no one deserves heaven. Jesus went to the cross to offer salvation to all (1 John 2:2). God is absolutely sovereign and doesn't desire any to perish (1 Timothy 2:3-4; 2 Peter 3:9). Yet many will perish in their unbelief (Matthew 7:13).

In heaven, we'll embrace God's holiness and justice. God will be our source of joy. Hell's small and distant shadow will not interfere with God's greatness or our joy in Him. All of this should motivate us to share the gospel of Christ with family, friends, neighbors and the whole world.