

DAY ONE – Entering Heaven

Before setting off on my first trip outside the continental United States in 1990, I went to work doing my research.

What was my destination, the Dominican Republic, like?

I wanted to see pictures of the land, the people, and the city where I was going.

I wanted to know about the culture, the language, and the customs of the social context of this island country in the Caribbean.

Because of my interest in the place where I was going my excitement for the research and actually arriving there was growing by the day.

Today we are beginning a series of messages on life in Heaven by making logical inferences derived from the literal interpretation of God's Word.

Scriptures tell us that we have a home in Heaven when we leave our bodies behind at death - To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.

This is taken from the teachings of Paul in **2 Corinthians 5:6-9**.

But what is Heaven like? What will we see and experience when we die?

It is interesting that most theologians of recent generations offer very little insight into Heaven and its properties.

There may be good reason for this lapse in study.

- Biblical teachers tend to be singularly focused on the here and now.
- Much of our knowledge is clouded by what we think is real or contrived.
- A lot of the end-times has so much imagery, most of what is meant for emphasis, we tend to conclude that everything is said about heaven is imagery as well.

Colossians 3:1-3 (NASB) says, *“Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. ³ For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.”ⁱ*

In his book, *Heaven*, Randy Alcorn says, “How can we set our hearts, or minds on things above, like Heaven, when we have an impoverished theology of Heaven?”

Even so God wants us to grow with excitement for the wonder and beauty of our eternal existence.

Our understanding of Heaven is left to the will of God, and we become content concluding that it *must be great!*

There is a story by H.G. Wells that speaks to our misguided contentment on the subject of Heaven.

He tells of a tribe in a remote valley deep in a towering mountain range. During a terrible epidemic, all the villagers lose their sight. Eventually, entire generations grow up having no awareness of sight or the world they’re unable to see. Because of their handicap, they do not know their true condition, nor can they understand what their world looks like. They cannot imagine what realms might lie beyond their valley.ⁱⁱ

But think about this: we have glimpses of Heaven right at our fingertips.

Our Bible truths are like hidden treasures from God right in front of us just waiting to be discovered.

God wants us to know enough about Heaven to gain an appreciation and anticipation for what He has prepared for us when this life has reached its end.

1 Corinthians 2:9-10 says, *“What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived” – the things God has prepared for those who love him – ¹⁰ these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit.”*

C.S. Lewis writes, “If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. ...aim at Heaven, and you will get Heaven and you will get earth ‘thrown in’: aim at earth, and you will get neither.” ⁱⁱⁱ

Let’s aim our search for understanding more about our inheritance to come.

What happens when we die?

1. Our SPIRIT leaves our body and is met by Jesus, as promised.

John 14:2-3

“My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”

In his 18th century expository work on scriptures, Matthew Henry says, “Christ speaks of his being there as now present, *that where I am*; where I am to be shortly, where I am to be eternally; there you shall be shortly, there you shall be eternally: not only *there*, in the same place; but *here*, in the same state: not only spectators of his glory, as the three disciples on the mount, but sharers in it.”

At the moment of our death we will be met, first by the angels and Jesus our Savior as we are ushered into our heavenly dwelling.

2. We will gain a new FORM that is both physical and spiritual.

Since believers won't receive our new, eternal *bodies* until the resurrection at the rapture, we will inhabit a recognizable, intermediate body in the present Heaven.

According to Randy Alcorn's conclusions, when we die...

- We will be with Jesus, in the presence of the Father.
- We will be in the angelic realm – invisible, yet very much alive.
- The present Heaven will be far better than the unredeemed earth.
- The present Heaven will be waiting for the revelation of the *New Heaven* and the *New Earth* – when all things are redeemed! (After the millennial reign of Christ Jesus on earth.)

Ecclesiastes 12:7 says, “*The dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.*”

**Our physicality will be a new, tangible structure that will be
in the spiritual realm.**

The book of Revelation references human beings talking and worshipping in Heaven prior to the resurrection which demonstrates that our spiritual beings are conscious, not sleeping after death.

John, the author of the Revelation, was taken into Heaven.

Revelation 4:1-6

“After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.’² At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.³ And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne.⁴ Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads.⁵ From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. In front of the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God.⁶ Also in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.”

John had a body, but was also in the Spirit – grasping, holding, eating, and tasting things while in Heaven (**Rev. 10:9-10**).

Consider Elisha’s servant (**2 Kings 6:15-17**).

He saw, *in the spiritual realm*, the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha coming to the battle they faced against a large army. This proved to be a great confidence builder.

¹⁵ *When the servant of the man of God [Elisha] got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. “Oh no, my lord! What shall we do?” the servant asked.*

¹⁶ *“Don’t be afraid,” the prophet answered. “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.”*

¹⁷ And Elisha prayed, “Open his eyes, LORD, so that he may see.” Then the LORD opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

Again, in **Acts 7:55-56** Steven was being stoned to death when, being “*full of the Holy Spirit*” he saw, *in the spiritual realm*, God’s glory with Jesus standing at the right-hand of God.

Paul says in **2 Corinthians 5:2-4**, “*Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, ³ because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. ⁴ For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.*”

Paul is longing to be with Jesus clothed in his “heavenly dwelling”.

3. We will be in PARADISE with Jesus.

Jesus told one of the thieves hanging with Him on Calvary, “*Today you will be with me in paradise*” **Luke 23:43**.

The word *paradise* had a cultural understanding among the people of the time of Jesus.

People would have pictured walled gardens in palaces of great nobility and power.

Alister McGrath writes, “The idea of a walled garden enclosing a carefully cultivated area of exquisite plants and animals was the most powerful symbol of paradise available to the human imagination, mingling the images of the beauty of nature with the orderliness of human construction.” ^{iv}

When Jesus used the word *paradise*, the people understood Him to be speaking of an actual physical place where God and His people live together, surrounded by physical beauty, enjoying great pleasures and happiness.

Revelation 2:7 says, *“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”*

This is the same *Tree of Life* that the enemy used to tempt humanity to sin.

Genesis 3:23-24 reminds us of what happened to *Paradise*, the Garden of Eden.

“²³ So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. ²⁴ After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.”

Since the Tree of Life was in the Garden, it makes sense that Eden was intact, but no longer available to human dwelling and is now in a realm where human eyes can no longer see.

When Adam and Eve fell into sin *“their eyes were open”* and they saw the world around them differently than the way they were created to observe all things.

This could be the present Heaven.

With Christ Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you have so much to look forward to, even the moment to leave your body on earth!

ⁱ All scripture references will be taken from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise noted.

ⁱⁱ Randy Alcorn, *Heaven*, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004), 11.

ⁱⁱⁱ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Collier Books, 1960), 118.

^{iv} Alister E. McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2003), 40.