4 What Does the Bible Say About Heaven?

1. Introduction

a. Heaven is much neglected and misunderstood, so we need to devote time to studying the subject. Everything that the bible reveals to us about heaven is a challenge to us because of its unfamiliarity. In the book of Revelation John struggles to find words to describe what he is seeing.

b. In the 21st century our lives are bereft of a sense of awe and wonder. The sophistication of technology can rob us of being drawn into a place of amazement beyond our expectations. God wants us to read what he has revealed to us about heaven and he wants to blow our minds with awe and wonder and take us beyond even our most vivid imagination.

c. We're going on a journey of discovery and begin to look at what the bible has to say about heaven. We'll look at some scriptures and see what conclusions we can draw from them that will impact upon us as we gather in the prayer room.

2. God created…

Genesis 1:1 *In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.*

a. This opening line of the bible is a summary statement for all the creative acts that God does in Genesis 1. How many times have you read this verse and then just skipped on to the next one? When you think of heaven what do you see? We have many images of heaven recorded in scripture, some of which are easier to relate to than others.

b. In this verse God created two things – the heavens and the earth. Two expressions of his glory. From the very beginning there was one unified integrated creation of God that had two expressions: the heavens and the earth. But although it was one act of creation, there are distinctions between what was created that we must take note of.

c. Notice that "heavens" is plural as we shall see. Everything from the skies to the throne of God itself was created at this moment in time – none of it existed eternally. All of the heavens had a real beginning point just like the earth, and exist within real time. So even heaven has a time dimension in terms of its beginning. The very first statement that God makes already takes us beyond knowledge and understanding.

d. Of the two things that God created, one was finite and the other was infinite. The earth is finite, it has clearly defined solid boundaries and measurable dimensions – it is quantifiable in terms of its distances, mass, volume and so on. But in contrast, the heavens are infinite, they cannot be measured, and even if they could those dimensions are ever-increasing.

Isaiah 9:7 *… of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end…*

3. …the heavens

a. When the bible speaks of heaven or the heavens, we need to know just what it is referring to. The Hebrew word used in Genesis 1:1 for heavens is ***shamayim*** – it is nearly always used in its plural form. The same word, ***shamayim***, is also the word for the sky. From a biblical perspective, heaven consists of everything from the clouds above the earth to the throne room in the dwelling place of God.

b. God teaches us through creation of the earth and the heavens; our response is to choose either faith or unbelief. Human reasoning – rationalism – will pull us away from faith, so we must humble ourselves and submit to the word of God.

c. The way we understand the Bible, when it speaks of heaven, is based on the idea of height, with the earth being the reference point in the middle. Everything above the earth is considered to be part of the ***shamayim*** – both what is visible and that which is beyond our sight. We see this illustrated in the New Testament and in particular in the language that Jesus uses to describe the proximity of heaven:

John 6:33 *For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.*

John 6:38 *For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.*

John 6:51 *I am the living bread that came down from heaven…*

John 6:62 *Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?*

John 8:23 *Jesus said to them, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world.*

Acts 1:9 *And when Jesus had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.*

d. From the scriptures we understand the heavens to consist of three parts: the first heavens, the second or mid-heavens, and the third heavens. The Bible does seem to make a distinction, and as we look at them we'll find that our focus becomes increasingly narrow until we are beholding a very specific aspect of the heavens that is the centre of all worship.

4. The First Heavens

a. The first heavens are the sky and everything that we can see when we go outside and look up. It is first of all the place that God has provided for all things that fly. It is also the place allocated to clouds and rain and snow, thunder and lightning and all kinds of weather. Beyond that, it is where we encounter the sun, the moon, the stars and the vastness of the visible universe.

b. However, we must not divorce that which is visible like the birds and the stars from that which is invisible such as the Seraphim and all the other orders of angels – they all inhabit the heavens. And of course, God himself does not dwell outside of his creation – he also dwells within the solid firmament of the heavens.

Isaiah 40:22 *It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in;*

5. The Second Heavens

a. The second heavens are a little more difficult to understand. Our goal in the house of prayer is to be thoroughly connected to the third heavens. One of the key questions for us is knowing how to delineate between the second and third heavens, and to know how to interpret those scriptures that refer to them. We find that on a number of occasions scripture refers to heaven not in exclusively positive terms but rather as a place of conflict where evil has some influence.

Ephesians 6:12 *"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places."*

b. This contrasts with the revelation of the glorious dwelling of God where he is enthroned and adored and constantly worshiped.

Daniel 10:12-14 *Then he said to me, "Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words. [13] The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days, but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I was left there with the kings of Persia, [14] and came to make you understand what is to happen to your people in the latter days. For the vision is for days yet to come."*

Revelation 12:7-9 *Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, [8] but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. [9] And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world---he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.*

c. These passages are not speaking of the third heavens, but are referring to the second heavens. The mid-heavens should be understood not as the dwelling place of God but as the domain of angels. This is the place of their delegated authority, where both good and evil purposes for the earth are contended for.

d. There are certain instances in which God is described as descending from his throne, and calling all to account, then rendering judgments. This is the second heavens, where God on occasion takes His place in the midst of His angel rulers – a place where Satan at present has access.

Psalm 82:1 *God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:*

Job 1:6 *Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them.*

Daniel 7:9-11 *As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. [10] A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened. [11] I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking. And as I looked, the beast was killed, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire.*

i In this plane of heaven God's will and purposes are imposed, executed, and enforced as it relates to the earth and its inhabitants.

Hebrews 4:14 *Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.*

Ephesians 1:20-21 *…that he [God] worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, [21] far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.*

a. What exactly did Jesus pass through when the writer of Hebrews tells us that he passed through the heavens? At his ascension Jesus passed through the first and second heavens and was received into his place of honour at the right hand of the Father in the third heavens.

b. Although now the second heavens remain a place of conflict, where Satan and his demonic angels have access, that will not always be the way it is.

Revelation 12:7-9 *Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, [8] but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. [9] And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world---he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.*

c. Satan and all of those angels who fell with him will be expelled from the second heavens and access will be barred. For a short time, his activities will be restricted to the earth until he is captured and imprisoned, and ultimately consigned to the lake of fire.

d. The second heavens are the least clearly defined in the scriptures, but they are presented to us in vividly concrete terms. Although they are neither visible nor accessible to us, nevertheless it is a real place inhabited by powerful orders of creation; it is clearly observable to those who are there and are able to access it. In the mid-heavens things happen that have both a physical and spiritual impact upon the earth and its inhabitants. However, it is also clearly differentiated from the first heavens that are visible from the earth, and the glories of the third heavens that are the dwelling place of God.

6. The Third Heavens

2 Corinthians 12:1-4 *"It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a one was caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—how he was caught up into paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter."*

a. Paul clearly had both a theological framework and, most likely, a practical experience of the three dimensions of heaven.

b. When considering the third heavens there are two very simple, but critical, affirmations that serve as the foundation for defining this part of God's creation. The third heavens are first of all, the **dwelling place of God**, and secondly the **everlasting home of the redeemed**. And by far this is the way the word heaven is most frequently used in the bible.

c. **The dwelling place of God**:

1 Kings 8:30 *And listen to the plea of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive.*

Psalm 33:13 *The LORD looks down from heaven; he sees all the children of man;*

Psalm 53:2 *God looks down from heaven on the children of man to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God.*

Matthew 6:9 *Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name."*

d. **The eternal home of the redeemed**:

John 14:2-3 *In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? [3] And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.*

1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 *For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. [17] Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.*

Colossians 1:4-5 *…we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, [5] because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel…*

Philippians 3:20 *But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ…*

e. We should allow these familiar passages of scripture to keep us focused and to sharpen our connection with the glories of heaven. The story of redemption is ongoing, it is moving towards a conclusion and a resolution, and we must not lose sight of our eternal destination. At the same time they must also keep us focused on what we've been called to in the house of prayer and to see the glory of God in heaven to impact upon the earth in our generation.

f. The climax of the revelation of heaven in the bible comes in the final three chapters of the book of Revelation. They contain within them a clear revelation of both the dwelling place of God and the eternal home of the redeemed.

g. Here, heaven is revealed as a mountain-city which contains both the Temple containing the throne of God, and also the "many dwelling places" that Jesus told us he has prepared for us. There are a number of things John tells us that we should take note of.

7. The Heavenly City

Revelation 21:1-5 *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. [2] And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. [3] And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. [4] He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." [5] And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."*

a. John describes this as "a new heaven and a new earth". What does that mean? Is it a brand new creation or a re-creation of what was there before? My conviction: heaven and earth are renewed, in other words it is the same earth and heaven that has been purged and purified and cleansed from all unrighteousness.

   i Firstly, the third heavens, the dwelling place of God remains pure and holy and entirely uncorrupted, untouched by any kind of sin, and therefore has no need to be recreated.

   ii Secondly the second heavens have by now been purged of any presence of evil, and only the holy, righteous angels have access.

   iii Thirdly, the earth and the first heavens. In the account of creation in Genesis, seven times God declares that what he has created is very good. But all of that creative perfection was placed under a curse because of sin, and it has affected every molecule of creation since then. However, Jesus' death and resurrection not only secured our salvation, but also called time on the curse and its hold over creation:

Romans 8:20-21 *For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope [21] that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.*

   iv Creation itself will be renewed in exactly the same way as we will be when we receive our resurrection bodies – the same but different.

b. John hears a loud voice proclamation that the dwelling place of God is with men. As we read on in this chapter we find that this is because God's throne and his dwelling place are within the New Jerusalem. This is God and man dwelling together for eternity. Now there will never be a time when God removes himself and his dwelling place from amongst his people.

c. John describes this city as a bride. Here he is referring back to a previous chapter

Revelation 19:7 *Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready;*

d. This gives us a solid, tangible connection to heaven today. In the bible the Bride of Christ is not just imagery, it actually defines the nature of our relationship with Jesus as our Bridegroom. This is a glorious revelation of the heart of a father towards his son, that we were eternally destined for this covenantal relationship even before the foundation of the earth itself.

   i We don't become his bride at the end of the age – we are his bride right now. Even now we can live in the glory of those faint echoes as we worship and pray and labour in the house of prayer. Our bridegroom is urging us onwards and helping us as we seek to make ourselves ready, an equally-yoked, pure and holy, spotless bride.

e. John also gives us insight into what life in the city will be like, by telling us some of the things that will not be there. The first thing is that God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Psalm 56:8 *You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book.*

   i What we can infer from this is that in heaven we will still have full capacity to express our emotions. We will still be very human in that respect, because we will still be image-bearers, carrying the image of God that he put there in the first place.

f. But then there are some other things that John highlights that will be totally absent.

   i No more death – Jesus has overcome death which he described as the final enemy, the ultimate consequence of the fall. If you are alive in the New Jerusalem, you will be alive for evermore.

   ii There will also be no more mourning. No loss of loved ones, friends or family.

   iii And no more crying – crying is associated with sadness or distress, there will be nothing to be sad or distressed about.

   iv There will be no more pain. Many of us suffer pain in this life, especially as we get older and bits of us begin to wear out. Because of sin these mortal bodies are subject to sickness and decay. But in heaven we will all have received our resurrection bodies that are immortal and not subject to decay in the same way that we are now.

8. Conclusion

a. John's revelation of heaven being a mountain-city is important because it serves to emphasise its solidity so that we are not tempted to perceive heaven incorrectly. The description John gives us in Revelation 21 must serve to make us curious to want to know more.

b. When we view heaven relative to the entirety of our existence, this life is just a tiny fraction. But these years are critical in our long-term future, and time and effort devoted to the pursuit of the one on the throne will never go unrewarded. As we devote time to worship and prayer, never forget we are filling up those golden bowls held by the elders and the four living creatures gathered around that same throne. As we worship, as we pray we are making a real connection with heaven that does not go un-noticed.

c. For endless years we will be thinking, feeling, working, playing and adoring Jesus, and we will be doing so for the most part from within the walls of the New Jerusalem, our eternal home.