

A Look At Heaven
(Heaven On Earth, pt 1)

Begin with “Field of Dreams” film clip...¹

We all have our ideas about heaven, wouldn't you say?

Many of those ideas have been tucked away into our minds through teachings that we've heard over the years, through Sunday School classes, through films (like this one), and sometimes through wishful thinking (“I hope heaven is like *this!*”) ... Those who write about ‘near-death experiences’ (such as the recent “90 Minutes in Heaven”) have a sure fire audience because people want to hear about these things. We want to know, we want reassurance.

Some would say that our longing for heaven is something that has been placed in us by God himself. In the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes 3: 11 we read

[God] has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart.

So God placed ‘set eternity in the human heart’, i.e., there *is* a God-given built-in longing in every human heart, a longing for something that goes beyond this world. Interesting, though, that the very next words in Ecclesiastes are these: ‘*yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.*’ So we find ourselves in this position where we have an inner thirst for something beyond this world, a drive pulling us toward the Eternal, yet we have no clue as to where to look to find out how that thirst can be quenched.

So cultures have made their best guesses, imagining a place that exists where the scales of justice will be balanced, where wrongs will be righted, and where pain will be eliminated. Nearly every culture has added their details to this basic picture of heaven.

Australian aborigines pictured Heaven as a distant island beyond the western horizon. The early Finns thought it was a distant island in the far away *east*. Mexicans, Peruvians, and Polynesians believed that they went to the sun or the moon after death. Native Americans believed that, in the afterlife, their spirits would hunt the spirits of buffalo.

¹ *Field of Dreams, Rated PG, written for the screen and directed by Phil Alden Robinson, produced by the Gordon Company, Universal Pictures, released 1989*

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In the pyramids of Egypt, the embalmed bodies had maps placed beside them as guides to the future world as well as tools, weapons, and gold to assist in the journey. The Romans believed that the righteous would picnic in the Elysian Fields, while their horses grazed nearby."

These ideas of the afterlife all differ, but what is common in the human heart throughout history is a belief in life after death. Anthropologists cite evidence suggesting that *every* culture has an innate sense of the eternal, an assurance - or a hope - that this world is not all there is.² Christians would say that God has truly placed eternity in our hearts. But we're confused as to what that means.

In the film clip we just watched, one character asks as he is in this 'Field of Dreams', and sees his son, "Is this heaven?" As I read the Scriptures I find myself coming more and more to the conclusion that like Jesus implied about his return, "If we have to ask... then we know it's not..." Jesus said that when he returned, it would be like the lightning flashing from east to the west, and every eye will 'behold' it. There will be no doubt.

And with heaven, if we have to ask, then it likely is not! In fact, I'm convinced that any human language about heaven is *by definition* suggestive and metaphorical, not literal. In other words, we can't possibly picture it adequately. Someone once said that trying to describe heaven is something akin to an unborn infant trying to describe the world outside the womb. And I agree with that. When it comes to *physical descriptions* of heaven, I think there is very little in the Scripture that is meant to be taken literally. And what *is* literal may be surprising to some of you. But it is all highly symbolic.

On the other hand, there is a lot going here on earth that gives us a fleeting picture of what heaven will be like. I call these "*hints* of heaven". And that is what this Epiphany series is going to be about. There are lots of 'hints' of what heaven is going to be like to be found right here on earth. Most of this series is going to be centered on those *hints* (as you may have noticed from

² Randy Alcorn, Heaven (Tyndale, 2004)

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our bulletin inserts and posters). But today, before we begin to talk about the hints, I'd like to dream a little bit with you, and look at what some Scriptures have to say about the *real thing*.

As human beings with this inner longing for heaven in our hearts, we've been really busy trying to picture what heaven is like. One of the main places people look to for 'information' is their own imaginations. And I think that's OK to a point – as I said, we're going to do a little of that today ourselves.

But even though there is really very little information given to us in the Bible about heaven as a physical *place*, I think its important to be sure that we balance our imaginations with what we know for certain from the Scripture. Otherwise we'll end up with a very secular and distorted picture of heaven as a place which is missing its most important part!

In a NY Times column entitled "Hooked on Heaven Lite", writer David Brooks writes of a picture of heaven, very popular picture, that forgets that Scripture teaches that the centerpiece of heaven is seeing and being with God - God unveiled.

*"In this [popular] heaven, God and his glory are not the center of attention. It's all about you. Here, sins are not washed away. Instead, hurt is washed away. The language of good and evil is replaced by the language of trauma and recovery."*³

The Bible certainly does teach that in heaven hurt *is* washed away – that pain and death are no more, that heaven is a place where there will be no more suffering, or persecution, no hunger nor thirst, no more injustice, or intolerance, or hatred or scars from being the victims of other people's sins. All true. Yet that *all* comes in the bigger context of our *being with God*.

C. S. Lewis once said, "*Heaven offers nothing that a mercenary soul can desire. It is safe to tell the pure in heart that they shall see God, for only the pure in heart want to.*"⁴

The joy of heaven, the attraction of heaven that makes all other characteristics fall into insignificance is that there we will be with God. This Holy One that we've experienced as

³ David Brooks, "Hooked on Heaven Lite," *www.NYTimes.com*, (3-9-04)

⁴ C. S. Lewis in *The Problem of Pain*. *Christianity Today*, Vol. 36, no. 7.

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looking through a glass dimly, this One that we've seen through glimpses, and fleeting thoughts, through mostly wordless emotions, and quiet recollections, this God will be fully and forever with us in heaven... in a way that we can only begin to imagine here on earth.

Look at 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 there was no longer any sea.

Here's one good example of what I said earlier about things not being literal in Scripture when it is describing the physical heaven. I actually heard someone once express a sense of sadness after reading these verses, about their having to spend 'forever' in a place where they won't ever be able to sit on a beach! Now, I'm not a beach guy, but I don't think that's what this verse means.

You see, earlier, in Revelation 4, John has a vision of the Throne of God. This vision is full of symbolism: 24 Elders, gold crowns, white robes, lightning and thunder, Emerald colored rainbows, and lots more. And in verse 6 he writes, *“Before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.”*

In a Royal Throne room on earth, especially in John's day of Emperors and Kings, the potency of a King would be illustrated by the space that one would have to cross to actually get to the throne in their Throne room. So, in this *heavenly* Throne room, surrounding God's throne there is 'a **sea** of glass, clear as crystal', i.e., a great divide that *separated* the throne of God from everything else. Everything – even in heaven itself!

So you can see right from the start that this *New Heaven and New Earth* at the end of time, is vastly different from the current situation. In fact, even heaven *itself* is changed. The Sea is gone! There is no longer any separation between God and God's creation. And that, in fact, is exactly what is described as we read on:

*I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, **and he will dwell with them.** They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from*

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their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!”

The best description of heaven that we have in the Bible is found in this passage – summed up in that one verse: *God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them.*

But notice something that I think is not an insignificant detail... i.e., *where* is this new heaven? Well it is on the *new* earth! This Holy City, the New Jerusalem ‘comes down out of heaven from God’ – where? To the Earth! And a loud voice calls out: saying, “*Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people...*” There is, without a doubt great symbolism here, but looking at the broader picture, and comparing this with some other Scripture passages, we can see that heaven, for a Christian believer, is going to be on the restored Earth with a Resurrection Body.

Now, I wish we had time to get into this in a deeper way, but let’s look at the bigger picture, and we have to go way back to see why this is important...the Bible begins with the story of God’s creation of all things, culminating in the creation of human kind, male and female created in the image of God. They live in a perfect environment. Everything is beautiful and works together in a wonderful synergy. They communicate perfectly with each other, *and* with God, who ‘walks among them in the cool of the Garden’. Don’t get hung up on the literalness of this; keep in mind that this is an ancient story telling us some important things about why things are like they are *now*.

That perfect environment falls apart with the introduction of sin – Adam (which simply means, ‘man’ in Hebrew) and Eve both rebel against the rule of God in their lives. They flex their free will and choose to do the *one* thing that they were told not to do. And the result is catastrophic.

They are cast out of the Garden. But that’s the least of their troubles. The earth itself is cursed, their relationship to one another is tainted, twisted – as every relationship from that time on will be. And worse of all: their fellowship with God is broken. They discover the meaning of what Paul wrote much later: that the wages of sin is death. People start to die – physically and spiritually. Their lives are shortened. They are full of trouble and conflict. There are diseases, natural disasters, wars and famines. There is greed and evil rampant and ever increasing.

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In all of this, God loves these frail humans that he created. And he sets in motion a plan to restore that lost relationship. The plan is to send a Redeemer, one who would pay the price for all the sins of all the people and thereby satisfy both the justice and mercy of our Holy God. One who would ‘reverse the curse’. That Redeemer is Jesus.

Those who choose to follow Christ – who receive his gift of forgiveness and life become part of the new family of God, and the first step of the reconciliation of all things begins. We become a new creation in Christ, but we *are not yet what we shall be*.

We read in Romans 8: 19 - 22, though, that what Jesus came to ‘fix’ is not limited just to people – his work is to turn back the curse completely, to heal *the world itself*.

For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are. Against its will, all creation was subjected to God’s curse. But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God’s children in glorious freedom from death and decay. For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

That day of release is the same as this day that John describes in Revelation 21, when the new Heaven and new Earth are revealed! This is the day when what was broken in Genesis 3 gets ‘fixed’, and fixed forever. This is the day when our relationship with God is completely restored to what was intended to be in creation from the very beginning of time. And it happens right here on the earth.

But not earth as we know it. Do you remember reading the post-Resurrection accounts of Jesus in the Gospels? We pay a lot of attention to the things he says during those appearances, (as well we should!) but we should also look at what he *did*. Paul writes in 1 Cor. 15: 20

*But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the **firstfruits** of those who have fallen asleep.*

That means that Jesus, after his resurrection, was the first in a line of something different. Other people had been brought back to life in Scripture – like Lazarus, for example. But technically, they were not Resurrected like Jesus (they were resuscitated). For one thing, they all died again!

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A Resurrection is different. You are raised to *eternal life*, and you are changed. Think about Jesus after his Resurrection – he ate and drank, he talked, he recognized his friends. Yet they had a hard time identifying him at first. He appeared in locked rooms, he seems to vanish at will. So think about this: Paul writes -

And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven. Jesus was the ‘first fruits’ of the Resurrection - meaning that we will receive bodies just like Jesus’ post- resurrection body.

[By the way, in the Apostle’s Creed, when we say, “I believe in the resurrection of the dead” that’s exactly what we’re talking about – that’s not a reference to Jesus’ Resurrection, but to *ours*.” The physical raising, in a way similar to Jesus’ raising, of all believers at the end of time, is a basic Christian doctrine.

So, all those heavenly images in your minds, of our being some kind of spectral beings floating around on clouds, playing harps, wearing robes, need to go! Replace them, if you can, with an image of Jesus cooking fish on a beach for his friends, of Jesus being hugged by Mary, of joy and exploration that will never end. Here on the recreated perfect earth in our resurrected bodies.

There is a very interesting book that I read a while ago by George Otis, called [The Twilight Labyrinth](#). In one section of this book he writes about all sorts of scientific studies of human brain anomalies – i.e., strange things that a very few people can do. From various savants who have amazing skills to calculate dates, or mathematical equations, or do music... to people with a rare syndrome called *synesthesia*. Synesthesia is when a person’s brain routinely expresses memories generated in one sense in terms of another. I.e., the senses are commingled.

So a person with Synesthesia may perceive sounds through colors or tastes. He also talks about examples of people who seem to be able to communicate with others through thoughts alone. He writes about the amazing capacity of the human brain, and what a small fraction of our latent ability we actually utilize... he writes about something that I never noticed before –how in the

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book of Genesis when Eve is being tempted by the ‘serpent’ how she at no point acts as if talking with an animal was anything but *normal!*

Anyway, I don’t have time for examples of this, but what Otis *suggests* is that instead of being *anomalies* – things gone wrong in the brain – what if all these things actually were some deeply buried vestige of the way we were meant to be all along? And what if, in the new heaven and new earth, and in our resurrection bodies, we will *all* have these unlimited capacities? As well as some of those physical abilities that Jesus exhibited. Kind of puts a whole new slant on Eternity... it’s a place I’d want to be.

The Chronicles of Narnia is C. S. Lewis’ wonderful series of stories about a magical land called Narnia where a few children from earth go to visit occasionally. Narnia is ruled by a great Lion, Aslan, who represents Jesus throughout the series. At the end of the last book – (The Last Battle) the children are expecting to have to go home once again, back to earth, and they’re not happy about this. But they have a surprise waiting:

[Aslan speaks to the children,] "You do not yet look so happy as I mean you to be." Lucy said, "We're so afraid of being sent away, Aslan. And you have sent us back into our own world so often."

"No fear of that," said Aslan. "Have you not guessed?"

Their hearts leaped and a wild hope rose within them.

"There was a real railway accident," said Aslan softly. "Your father and mother and all of you are—as you used to call it in the Shadow-Lands—dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream has ended; this is morning."

And as he spoke he no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.⁵

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*