


What's So
GREAT ABOUT
HEAVEN?

by TOM
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*Other than not going to hell,
why should we look forward to forever in glory?*

*Heaven is a wonderful place,
Filled with glory and grace.
I want to see my Saviour's face.
Heaven is a marvelous,
Heaven is a glorious,
Heaven is a wonderful place.*

—really old gospel chorus

 That's a chorus I used to sing with the rest of my youth group in a damp church basement. We were confident as Christians—people who had trusted Christ to save us from sin and make us God's children—that our afterlife would be wonderful. Trouble was, none of us had any firsthand experience of the place. And while the Bible did tell us a few things, a lot of what it said about heaven was hidden in symbolic language.

But we still believed in heaven—and hell, for that matter. Most people do. One survey revealed that 78 percent of Americans believe in the existence of heaven; 60 percent believe in hell. Even people with no religious affiliation believe in them—45 percent for heaven, 36 percent for hell. And when Americans were asked whether they had a good or excellent chance of going to heaven when they died, 78 percent said yes. Only four percent thought they would go to hell. But not many of these people had any concrete ideas about what either place was really like.

Visualizing the afterlife hasn't gotten any easier either, because the media has spent millions trying to visualize it for us. More often than not, the entertainment industry presents some kind of reincarnation twist or ghost-has-to-haunt-his-former-loved-ones element to the story. Sadly, this is the only "teaching" about the afterlife that some people ever get. It leads to a lot of myth-making and confusion.

Fortunately, the Bible does tell us some important things about heaven—in fact, it tells (or implies) much more than most of us think. Let's take a look at some popular myths about heaven, then see what the Bible really says.

Myth #1: "Heaven isn't a real place."

This myth is popular with people who can't accept the idea of a world beyond what they can see, hear, touch, taste, or smell. Many of them believe that you make your own heaven or hell here on earth, in a figurative sense. Then when you die, that's it: You're history.

The Bible, though, does speak of heaven as a real place, where real things happen to real persons. It's a place where God lives; it's a place from which God sent His angels to deliver messages; and it's also the place Lucifer (Satan) and a group of rebel angels were kicked out of after trying to steal God's glory for themselves. Heaven is a place where events of eternal significance have happened and continue to happen.

But let's get down to specifics. The Bible also tells us about the physical layout and atmosphere of the heavenly city. Revelation 21:9–22:5 gives John's awesome vision of the "New Jerusalem." The highlights:

- **Heaven is large, bright, and colorful—a place of wonder.** It is a walled city 1,500 miles square (v. 16). That's about four times the area of Alaska. But it's also 1,500 miles high. That doesn't necessarily mean heaven is a giant cube. It could be made up of "skyscraper" structures reaching that height—or it could be a pyramid.

John says the city's brilliance is "like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal" (v. 11), and the city itself is golden in color, "as pure as glass" (v. 18).

The wall of the city (216 feet high, v. 17) has 12 foundation stones named for the 12 apostles and is decorated with precious stones (vv. 19-20) that show off the colors of the rainbow. The wall has 12 gates, three on each

side, each described as “a single pearl” (v. 21). The street of the city is “gold, like transparent glass” (v. 21).

It’s a fascinating scene. John used earthly images—shapes, colors, materials—to describe dazzling, other-worldly characteristics of heaven. We can’t be sure exactly if these descriptions are literal or just the closest John could come up with—and we could accept—given the limitations of the human mind. But we can be sure that heaven is a feast for the senses and an amazing place to live.

• **Heaven is a place of peace.**

Being with God means being in the presence of perfection. All the old aggravations of being an earthbound human will be gone. God will wipe away every tear. Death, mourning, crying, and pain—all gone forever (v. 4).

What’s more, heaven is off-limits to sin and sinners.

Nothing impure will get in—no shameful or lying people—only people whose names are written down in the Lamb’s Book of Life (v. 27).

Have you ever lost someone close to you? Have you or a family member ever suffered from a painful physical condition? Have you ever been hurt by someone else’s sin? No more. Heaven is a place where people can enjoy God without all the hassles of our imperfect world.

• **Heaven is a place of plenty.**

John described heaven as a place where we’ll have everything we need. He reported that an angel showed him a crystal-clear river flowing from God’s throne with the water of life. On each side of the river, the tree of life gave fruit every month, 12 crops of fruit in all (Rev. 22:1-2). He also wrote that heaven will be night-

less. God’s glory will light up the whole place all the time. No lamps necessary. We’ll rule with God forever and ever (v. 5).

Whether or not people actually eat a lot of fruit and drink a lot of water in heaven, these verses suggest that God will give us everything we need forever. They also suggest that citizens of heaven live like royalty (more on that later).

Heaven is not just a state of mind. It’s a real place where real things happen—really awesome and amazing things.

Myth #2: “People who die and go to heaven become angels.”

This idea is definitely influenced by the media. For example, in the charming Christmas story, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, a troubled banker is aided by an endearing angel—a little man who claims to have died hundreds of years earlier and is trying to “earn his wings” as an angel by helping humans.

This myth may exist due to a misunderstanding of Scripture. In Matthew 22, the Sadducees asked Jesus about a woman who had had seven husbands in a row in her earthly life. Whose wife would she be in heaven? Jesus answered that in the resurrection, people won’t marry; they’ll be like the angels in heaven (v. 30). Jesus’ point was that human beings in the future life will be *like* angels in one, specific way. Jesus never said that humans would *become* angels. Angels are special, unique beings created by God for special purposes.

The Bible does talk, though, about the resurrected believer having a glorified body—one that will never die or decay (1 Cor. 15:42, 44). The pattern for this new body is seen in Jesus after His resurrection. His was a

solid body, and yet, He could appear and disappear at a moment’s notice (Luke 24:31). Many theologians speculate that in heaven, in our resurrected bodies, we’ll be able to travel like this—at the speed of thought. Jesus could also apparently pass through solid structures, such as a wall—He appeared to His disciples in rooms where the doors had been shut (John 20:26).

Whatever the special characteristics of our glorified bodies, whatever their special powers, they will be recognizable—we’ll know our friends and family—and be specially suited for the environment of heaven. Think of a caterpillar: It can’t imagine being able to fly. But someday it will change into a butterfly, and its whole view of reality will change with its body’s new ability. We are destined for a physical reality full of great surprises.

Myth #3: “People who go to heaven live in big mansions with luxury cars in the driveway.”

It seems clear enough from Jesus’ own words: “In my Father’s house are many mansions. . . . I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2, KJV). The word “mansions” suggests a fashionable Beverly Hills pad to people in our culture. It sounds like a heavenly reward for having “gotten in.” But the Greek word for “mansions” in this verse might be better translated “dwelling places.” Some Bible scholars say “apartments” is pretty close to the idea here. God *is* preparing places for us; we just shouldn’t use earthly values to try to guess what they will be like.

But we can be sure that our dwelling places in heaven will be

beyond our wildest dreams. If they're anything like the rest of the city, we won't be complaining.

Myth #4: "Life in heaven will be dull."

The reasoning on this one is that when we die and go to heaven, "the game is over." We spend our lives on earth eating, sleeping, working, playing, learning, growing, facing challenges, succeeding, failing—trying to live life to the fullest. But in heaven everything will be perfect, effortless. There will be no meaning to life in heaven because there won't be anything meaningful to do—no obstacles to overcome or goals to achieve (and no sin to spice things up). We'll have the whole world on a golden platter. Then what?

This myth simply shows our puny thinking. Ask yourself this question: Why would God create the world; give human beings free will only to see them disobey Him; start over after the Flood; make Israel His chosen people and give them the Ten Commandments only to see them disobey Him; give them a Messiah only to see Him crucified; send apostles to evangelize the world only to see them killed for the Gospel; send the Spirit to create the Church only to see the Church stray from Him; and reform the Church only to see it persecuted by an unbelieving world in the end times? Why? Why would He go to all that trouble? So that Christians can go to heaven and sit around doing nothing?

Of course not. God has been up to something much more important than that. *He's getting us ready for His kingdom.* In His unending patience and love, He has been working through human history to allow His creatures to participate in that kingdom—a place where the chief activity will be getting to know God fully and worshiping Him.

Faith in Jesus Christ gives us citizenship in this great kingdom. It will be anything but dull. Since eternity is outside of time, there will be plenty of room for lots of creative activities. We won't be weighed down by human imperfections; we'll have unlimited potential to build on the foundation we've built in our earthly lives.

We won't just *be* with God; we'll *reign* with Him. God will have whole new areas of responsibility for us. How faithfully we follow Christ in this life will determine our reward in heaven. None of us will be sorry we came.

Heaven *is* a wonderful place. A real place where we'll have glorified bodies. A place to live and get to know God fully and really become who He meant us to be all along. Hope to see you there. **Z**

The Dark Side

Now the bad news: While the Bible speaks of heaven, a place of eternal bliss, it also speaks of hell, a place of eternal punishment and torment. This is also a real place, where real things happen to real people. It is a place reserved for people who are not God's children because they have rejected Christ. These people will be identified and judged by God based on their works. And since no one is sinless, those who haven't trusted Christ will be sent to hell.

One of the best known descriptions of hell comes not from the Bible, but from classical literature. Dante's *Inferno* goes into great, imaginative detail about a multilevel place of destruction that spirals down, down, down, with all kinds of creative punishments along the way. One particular evildoer was locked in a metal cage suspended over fire, while flames intermittently shot through him. That was to be his fate for all eternity.

Creative? Yes. Grim? To be sure. But a little too colorful, even for the Bible. The Word of God doesn't get overly specific about what hell is like or what punishments it has in store.

From the Bible we do know that hell is described as a fiery place of judgment. John wrote that anyone whose name isn't written in the Book of Life will be thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:15). But Jesus also called it a place of separating when He said that unbelievers would be thrown outside, into darkness, where there will be crying and teeth gnashing (Matt. 8:12). In 2 Thessalonians, Paul wrote that people who disobeyed the Gospel would be punished with forever destruction and shut out from God's presence and power (1:9).

Fire? Darkness? Destruction? It all points to a place you'd rather not end up. The cost of unbelief means eternal separation from the loving presence of God, to be left alone with one's guilty conscience for eternity.

The good news is, you don't have to go to hell. You can choose to trust Christ and live with Him forever. When you think about it, that's really not much of a choice at all.

Welcome to the *Zelos* [zee-loss] *Journal for Student Disciples*. Our big idea for this journal is to help student disciples like you deepen your relationship with God—and give you a calendar to keep track of every part of your life.

How?

Three ways.

1. Every quarter, we'll include several

helpful articles about a specific topic or part of the Bible. You'll find these up front.



2. Next, we've included some in-depth Bible studies and journaling pages to help you dig into God's Word for yourself. We call these "Z-Studies." This is



meaty stuff. Hope you're hungry.

3. Finally, we've included a calendar with lots of space to write down everything in your busy schedule. It's in the back.

Of course we've thrown in some extras just for fun. Enjoy. Grow.

Editor's Note

Some would say Christianity is a pretty morbid belief system. Many of us chose to trust in Christ after thinking about the question, "Where will I go when I die?" And what we believed was that Jesus allowed Himself to be tortured and killed to pay the price of our own death-worthy sinfulness.

That's a lot of talk about death—but I don't think it's morbid. I think it's honest.

Everybody dies. Some sooner. Some later. To ignore that fact is to hide from the truth. To admit it and deal with it is a realistic way to approach life. Christianity is really about the positive solution to the problem of death.

Yes, Jesus died for us. But the Bible also says that He defeated death forever when He walked out of His tomb alive.

Yes, our own coming deaths may motivate us to trust in Christ and be forgiven for our sins—but what we find in Him is a more meaningful life on this earth and a perfect, pain-free life forever in heaven.

Honestly thinking about death shouldn't depress us. It's a hard reality—but we've found the answer. Death won't defeat God's children, only unite them with Him and each other forever.

That's why in this issue of the *Zelos Journal for Student Disciples* we're talking about death and what does and doesn't come after it. First we'll take a close look at some myths and facts about heaven (and hell). Then we'll ask the question, "Are Ghosts for Real?" We'll also eavesdrop on the diary of a student who is dealing with the death of a close friend.

Finally, we'll wrap up in November with a month's worth of "Z-Studies" on what the Bible says about death and our lives after. (In September and October, we'll be studying what the Bible says about the Bible and taking a quick tour of the Old Testament.)

As always, we'd love to hear what you think about this issue of the *Zelos Journal*. Hope you have a great autumn.